



JEEVADHARA

JESUS AND WOMEN

Edited by
Jacob Parappally

PROCESSED

OCT 20 2010

GTU LIBRARY

JEEVADHARA

is published every month
alternately in English and Malayalam

GENERAL EDITOR

Joseph Constantine Manalel

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Kuncheria Pathil

SECTION EDITORS

Societal Concerns

Felix Wilfred

Sunny Maniyakupara

Word of God

Rekha Chennattu

George Edayadiyil

The Living Christ

Jacob Parappally

Jose Panthackal

Communion of People

Kuncheria Pathil

Vincent Kundukulam

Harmony of Religions

Sebastian Painadath

P. T. Mathew

Fulness of Life

Mathew Illathuparambil

Mathew Paikada

Secretary

P.U.Abraham

jeevadhara

A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

Jesus and Women

Edited by:
Jacob Parappally

Malloossery P.O.,
Kottayam - 686 041
Kerala, India

Tel: (91)(481) 2392530, 2397017

E-mail: ktm_jeeval23@sancharnet.in

Web: www.jeevadhara.org

CONTENTS

	Page
Editorial	171
Crucified Christ, Crucified Women: Decoding the Enigma of Crucifixion	175
<i>Kochurani Abraham</i>	
"Where is Your Sister?"	195
<i>Alice Earani</i>	
The Power of the Bleeding Woman: A Rereading of Mark 5: 21-34	204
<i>Shalini Mulackal</i>	
Re-constructing Woman's Self-Understanding and her Destiny: An Indian Feminist Reading of the Bent Woman (Lk 13:10-17)	217
<i>Evelyn Monteiro</i>	
Women Theologizing: Beginnings of Feminist Theologies and their Concerns	232
<i>Pearl Drego</i>	

Editorial

The passing of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Upper House of the Indian Parliament and the Government's eagerness to get it passed in the Lower House of the Parliament must be recognized as the fruit of a prolonged struggle of Indian women to secure their rights to participate in the process of nation-building. Opponents argue that the reservation would help only elite women in the society to share political power and not the poor women in the society who suffer discriminations at various levels. However, the first barrier to be broken seems to be the mind-set that would not recognize women as equal partners with men in shaping the destiny of the Indian nation and society.

Even in the 21st century women have to struggle hard to secure their rights to live with dignity as humans. The reality of this painful struggle of women must disturb all men to recognize how it affects their self-understanding as humans. The rights and privileges, opportunities and options that are available to all men in almost all societies and nations which they take for granted as normal, are denied to women because they are women. Complex cultural symbols are created, religious texts are written, and powerful myths are told and retold to keep women in subjugation. In all spheres of life, whether religious, cultural, political or economic, the patriarchal and kyriarchal systems of governance deprive women of their right to live as humans with dignity even though they constitute about fifty per cent of the population. Male domination and discrimination of women dehumanize not only the victims but also the perpetrators of the crime because it reduces the quality of their being as human. Both men and women need liberation to live and unfold themselves as humans.

It is in the context of women's struggle to realize their full humanity that Jesus' life and message concerning human dignity and destiny become very relevant and challenging. It is the Christian belief and conviction that Jesus Christ is God's revelation of what humans are and what they can become. This faith-conviction has its origin in Jesus' response to the oppressive systems of dehumanization in the society of his times. Jesus prophetically denounced all systems and structures that created laws and regulations to oppress the poor and the marginalized. He had a special concern for women because they belonged to the periphery of the male-dominated society. They were denied of their right to live as dignified humans and indeed, daughters of God. No wonder, then, many who followed Jesus were women because in his presence they could be themselves, recognized, accepted, valued, respected and loved.

In this issue of *Jeevadhara* with the general theme *Jesus and Women* various concerns of women and their struggles to reclaim their full humanity in relation to Jesus and his message are discussed. The articles of this issue deal with the experience of discrimination of women at the grass-roots level, naming of the agencies of oppression and dehumanization, the challenge to all women to stand up against the forces of dehumanization in solidarity with all women and men who are committed to the cause of women, Jesus' liberating and empowering encounter with women who are victims of religious, social and cultural oppression as well as the rise of women theologians to interpret their faith in the light of their experience.

In her article, "Crucified Christ, Crucified Women: Decoding the Enigma of Crucifixion", Kochurani Abraham questions the cultural paradigm which prescribes suffering as the 'privileged lot' of women. She argues that women who are victims of violence are not to be consoled by identifying them with the bleeding Jesus. In her encounter with two women who live with the reality of pain and anguish and the third one who took away her own life crushed under the burden of a system that would not let her live a dignified human life, the author rejects an interpretation of the cross and suffering of Jesus that leads to passivity and resignation. She affirms that the cross can make sense

only if seen from the perspective of liberation as a symbol that challenges women and men of today to take a stand with prophetic courage for the cause of justice, truth and love.

In the article, "Where is Your Sister?", Alice Earani who lives among the poorest and discriminated women in North Karnataka makes a theological reflection on her experience of being with this deprived section of the society. Today, in many parts of the world women cannot live and unfold as real humans because of the patriarchal society with its oppressive customs and practices. In the midst of the struggles of women to recover the meaning of their lives as humans, God asks this question to all men, "Where is your sister?" The author points out that to follow the paradigm of Jesus in dealing with the oppressive situation of women in his society, is a challenge to the Church and all who are enlightened to recognize the rights of women as humans and to work in solidarity with them to regain their rights suppressed by a patriarchal society.

Shalini Mulackal, in her article, "The Power of the Bleeding Woman: A Rereading of Mark 5: 21-34" makes an attempt to understand the significance of the bleeding woman in the Gospel of Mark in the context of Indian women of Dalit origins. What are the similarities between this Gospel woman who appropriated 'power' from Jesus and the struggling Dalit women of today? In what ways can this bleeding woman of Galilee can function as a powerful symbol for the bleeding Dalit women of India to liberate themselves from the shackles that confine them to remain victims of an unjust system? The author argues that the deep faith of some Dalit women in the power of Jesus and in the intercession of his mother to heal them as well as their experience of being healed empower them to become agents of liberation.

In her article, "Re-constructing Woman's Self-Understanding and her Destiny: An Indian Feminist Reading of the Bent Woman (Lk 13:10-17)" Evelyn Monteiro argues that the exclusion and subjugation are partially based on the traditional association of women's status with sexuality, sin and reproduction, and on myths of labeling women as polluted, temptress, weak and inferior. The oppressive polity of domination-dependency 'bends' the Indian woman in stages and

gradually denies her of her dignity, individuality and identity. An Indian Christian woman is further bent with oppressive demands made on her as an Indian and a Christian. According to the author a hermeneutic reading of Lk 13:10 -17 from an Indian perspective will enable us to re-construct the woman's sense of self and body that is liberative and life-enhancing. It would, indeed, be a Gospel proclamation to all bent women in our society.

Pearl Drego, in her article, "Women Theologizing: Beginnings of Feminist Theologies and their Concerns", outlines the development of an Indian Feminist theology articulated from the experience of anguish and suffering of women as women. Feminist theologies were not worked out "in theory", or in academic locations, though they have academic standing today and utilize the best resources of scholarship. They include women's perspectives on salvation history, rejection of gender stereotypes, commitments to changing relationships within Church and family, promotion of new political norms, campaigns to build an egalitarian society where both men and women can live with respect, love, freedom, equality, justice and a deep mystical relationship to God. The author explains that the Indian feminist theology while rooted in Indian realities draws on insights and strategies from Asian and international projects for women's emancipation in Church and society.

Jesus preached about the arrival of the Kingdom in which all humans would be sisters and brothers; no higher, no lower, no superior, no inferior, no dominating or dominated gender or class. In a society of God's plan which Jesus called the Kingdom of God, all would live with equal dignity because all are created in the image and likeness of God, the Absolute communion. God's plan, as revealed by Jesus, is yet to be fully realized. But the process of its realization continues in history when women and men recognize the need to work together as partners to re-claim the basic human rights of everyone especially women and other discriminated sections in any society.

Jacob Parappally

Tejas Vidya Peetha, Bangalore -560074

E-mail: Parappally@gmail.com

Crucified Christ, Crucified Women: Decoding the Enigma of Crucifixion

Kochurani Abraham

Through the pain and anguish of three real women, whom the author encountered in the recent past - two alive but almost dead and the third dead but her story of life still alive in the lives of many women - the author interrogates the cultural paradigm which prescribes suffering as the 'privileged lot' of women. These real stories raise a hermeneutic of suspicion on the belief systems and theological interpretations that continue to justify religiously the distorted socio-cultural prescriptions of gender. They call for resurrection not as an after-death occurrence, but as a lived liberative experience here and now. The life stories of these three women invite the reader to hear beyond their voices and raise critical questions. The author takes a critical look at the role played by religion in perpetrating women's crucifixion through what it says and what it fails to say, and finally reclaim the political import of the resurrection in view of bringing into relief its liberative effects in the life of women. The author argues that women who are victims of violence are not to be consoled by identifying with the bleeding Jesus. The cross can make sense only if seen from the perspective of liberation as a symbol that challenges women and men of today to take a stand with prophetic courage for the cause of justice, truth and love.

Sr. Kochurani Abraham is currently a research scholar in the Dept. of Christian Studies, University of Madras. She teaches feminist theology and feminist spirituality and is interested in bridging the academia with the grassroots for a liberative praxis. She is committed to promoting gender justice, ecological consciousness and partnership in the church and in society.

‘I am a woman
and the blood
of my sacrifices
cries out to the sky
which you call heaven’
- Gabriele Dietrich

‘Was woman herself not the tree of life? And was she not crucified? Not in some age no one remembers, but right now, daily, in many lands.’ Alice Walker

The news of women being “killed” emotionally and physically, through abuse and violence in many homes, as projected by the media does not shock people any more as it is an everyday event. I was confronted by this phenomenon directly in the course of the fieldwork of my research on women, and some of the cries which I heard continue to haunt me. I want them to be heard by a wider world, so also the many unanswered theological questions that arise from them. Therefore this attempt to decode the enigma of crucifixion in the lives of women, for which I take the life stories of three catholic women.

Life stories are subjective, as is one’s self or identity. The life story constructs and transmits individual and cultural meanings. They contain ‘narrative truth’¹. This truth challenges us to critically examine the ideologies that lie beneath the constructed identity of women as the ‘sacrificial lambs’ of society. It also calls for a re-interpretation of the crucifixion-resurrection paradigm of the Christ-event in a manner that is liberative for human life today. The narratives on the ‘crucifixion’ of these women at the altar of the ‘sacrosanct’ institution called the family is the starting point of my theological considerations in this paper.

Case of Mary: The Violence of Silencing

The case of Mary², a middle aged housewife, is demonstrative of the hegemonic grip of power equations in a traditional household.

1 Cf. Amia Lieblich, R.T. Mashiach and Tamar Zilber, *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation*, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988. p.8.

2 Mary. (name changed) to protect the identity of the person. hails from an

Her silenced voice speaks aloud of the covert experiences of violence that continue to be the lot of many women.

In her words:

“I was born eldest in my family with two daughters and three sons. My parents were caring, but they brought me up in a highly protected environment. So I grew up in a ‘comfortable dependency’ of not having to think for myself.

I happened to be a bright student, and I had opportunities of a good education. I was gold medalist in college when I graduated in chemistry and certainly everyone thought I would have a successful career ahead. But I discontinued studies due to family pressure to settle down in marriage, as customary of the conventional Christian households of the 80s. I did like teaching for a career, but being docile by nature, I was too diffident to take the reins of life in my own hands, and so decided to walk the beaten path of marriage in conformity with the desire of others.

Once married, I tried to fit into the prescribed mould of a ‘good’ catholic Syrian Christian upper middle class housewife. I mothered three children. Living in a posh bungalow in a pleasant suburb of the town, my friends and cousins envied me. But when I look back over the last twenty three years of marriage, I wonder what has become of my life! Some times I ask myself: I do exist, but am I really living? On the repeated injunctions from my husband to keep quiet, I seem to have lost my voice. Being denied over and over again the freedom to express an opinion, now I am doubting my capacity even to think about anything.

In my house all the decisions are taken by my husband. When our house was built, the plan was made completely according to his ideas. I was not consulted even while designing the kitchen or work area, or the interiors of the house. Even if I were to express an opinion, it would be ignored completely.

and if I were to insist, he would become violent. Then I decided not to contest his opinions and decisions for the sake of peace. I was an obedient child earlier and now I made a choice to become more compliant as I find that the only way to survive in my marriage. Even in sexual relations, I am just available to satisfy my husband's needs and desires and I got sterilized after my third pregnancy as per his decision.

Marriage has confined me to the domestic space. My husband considers domestic work my duty and obligation and even demands that I keep ready fresh home-made snacks every evening when he returns from work. He gives me sufficient money for household expenses and buys me and children enough clothes and other things, but he also demands a strict account of all that I spend. There is so much pressure to keep every thing going as per his will, and I spend the whole day just doing odd things in the house. I think if I don't do well at least the domestic work, my life will be a zero.

I feel I have become brain damaged after marriage and that makes me feel disappointed and angry. At times I envy even my maid who has much more freedom than me in her mobility and to spend money for what she thinks is right. I think women have become lesser than men in many aspects. Men have gone ahead with the opportunities and the social space they have in life. If at all women had a share of these opportunities where would they have reached ?”

Lissy: The Violence of Merciless ‘Self-giving’

Lissy³, mother of five children is the daughter-in law in a traditional migrant family. Her story speaks for many women who continue to be broken, that others in the family may have life. We give her a hearing:

“ I studied only up to the tenth class, then worked in a tailoring centre for three years before marriage. I could not go to college as we had no money. My father worked as a supervisor

3 Lissy (name changed) in her mid- thirties belongs to a middle class farming family in a rural set up. Her story was narrated in an interview in May 2009.

in a rubber plantation, but he used to drink. If my mother were to ask him for more money than what he would give, he would be provoked and become very violent. So even the meager salary I got from the tailoring centre, I used to give my mother out of desire for peace in the house.

Because I was fair and good looking as per our community's standards, I got a proposal when I was just nineteen years old. The boy's family was much better off than ours, they had their own property, and so this proposal was much beyond what my family could aspire for. Luckily they did not demand much dowry, all they wanted was the girl and so I was married off rather young.

Through marriage I came into a large family with nine children. Two of my husband's sisters have become nuns and one brother joined for priesthood. My husband's brothers and sisters are all more educated than him. Because he was not good in studies, he discontinued after eighth class and started working with my father-in-law in the farm, and so he chose to remain in the family house even after marriage.

I conceived my first child just two months after marriage. It was a difficult pregnancy as I had to do all the house work alone, besides taking care for my in-laws. Being in the family house, we would always have visitors and so my kitchen work and washing were unending. Only for my first delivery I was sent home as per the custom. As my first child was a girl, my husband told me that I have to give birth until I got a boy child, and he meant it. In nine years of my marriage I delivered five children, with God's grace my fifth child turned out to be a boy and that put an end to my continual pregnancies.

Now I am only thirty five years old, but I feel very aged and tired. My day begins before the crack of dawn. Eight mouths to be fed, two cows to be milked, besides the cleaning and washing that is endless. Look at my hands. it is all cut and inflamed from grinding the masala, washing clothes, cleaning

the house and cutting grass for the cows. We do have a grinder at home, but if I use it my mother-in law gets angry and shouts saying the electricity bill will go up. She prefers that I prepare the masala on the grinding stone. My hands and legs ache all the time. But I go on like a machine. Sometimes I imagine I may just collapse and everything is over, but I only hope I will live up to see my children grown up and settled."

Shiny: The Violence of Death

Shiny, a twenty eight year old woman and mother of three, is no more. I did not hear her voice, only saw her life-less body as it was brought to her husband's house after postmortem. Her cold emaciated body spoke of her plight as I helped to wash her, drape her in her *manthrakodi*⁴ and put her in the coffin.

The obvious question raised was: how did Shiny die? I was told that she committed suicide. She hung herself on the cradle rope of her twin children who were just seventy days old. My mind was flooded with more questions. Was she mentally imbalanced? I was told 'no.' Was she battered by her husband? Again the answer was 'no'. Why then did she put an end to her life?

This is her story which I gathered from her neighbours.

Shiny was educated up to twelfth standard, and was married to the younger son of that middle-class family with two sons. The elder son died some years earlier and so she and her husband lived with his parents. Shiny's father-in law was into money-lending business besides having a small yielding plot of land, and her husband was also into some small scale business in the local town.

Shiny's eldest child was a three year old boy. She conceived again and in her eighth month, she delivered twins (two boys again). The children being born premature had to be incubated for more than a month in a special *mother and child* hospital, and she had returned to her husband's house just a month earlier with the two infants.

4 The saree put on the bride's head by the groom during the marriage as per the Syrian Christian tradition.

What provoked Shiny to take that extreme step? I was told that she hailed from a family which was lot more poorer than her husband's family. Even for getting her married, her family had mortgaged their house in order to pay her dowry. For her first delivery, she was sent home only for fifteen days. Then on she hardly visited her maternal home which was barely 30 kms way, as she was expected to be available in her husband's house on a 24 hr duty, 7 days a week. For the second delivery, she was taken to hospital by her husband, but, after the children were born, her father-in law started harassing her, insisting that she should ask her family to give the 75,000 Rs. he spent on the children's incubation. Her husband kept quiet and played safe before his father's persistent mental torture. Her mother-in law was equally voice-less and powerless before her husband's fury. Unable to bear the torture and drained of physical and mental energies to go on, Shiny decided to put an end to her own suffering.

Shiny's family, deeply hurt by the tragic death of their daughter, put a police case against her husband and father-in law for inflicting mental torture on her. They refused to come to her husband's house where her body was kept for a couple of hours before her burial. They saw the life-less body of their daughter as it was brought to the parish church. Unable to contain their deep anguish and sorrow, they screamed as they clung to it, refusing to lay her down in the grave. Witnessing that was a nightmarish experience.

Shiny's funeral was a on a Saturday. The next day being Sunday, as I went to the same parish for morning Mass, the memories of the previous day were fresh and sore. What was still devastating for me was the silence about this shocking event at the community celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. A solemn High Mass with loud singing and a long homily was celebrated on that Sunday morning, without even a mention of the appalling death that happened in the same community the previous day. What a strange mockery of the paschal mystery, the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Hearing their 'Narrative Truth'

The narratives of Mary, Lissy and Shiny speak aloud the truth of women who continue to suffer and die under the gendered ideologies that normalize violence. The pain and anguish conveyed through these stories interrogate the cultural paradigm which prescribes suffering as the 'privileged lot' of women. They raise a hermeneutic of suspicion on the belief systems and theological interpretations that continue to justify religiously the distorted socio-cultural prescriptions of gender. They call for resurrection not as an after-death occurrence, but as a lived liberative experience here and now.

The life stories of these three women invite us to hear beyond their voices and raise critical questions, for which a critical consciousness is imperative. Critical consciousness entails a deeper understanding of the world, a deeper perception of its socio-cultural and political contradictions.⁵ Critical consciousness makes us uncomfortable with oppressive paradigms, and power structures that we cannot rest until something is done about it. Sharing this 'restlessness', first I will analyze the 'narrative truth' posed by these life stories from a sociological perspective, and then take a critical look at the role played by religion in perpetrating women's crucifixion through what it says and what it fails to say, and finally reclaim the political import of the resurrection in view of bringing into relief its liberative effects in the life of women.

The 'Normalization' of Gendered Violence

Feminist analysts have observed that the defining characteristic of violence against women is in its ordinariness, its quotidian nature and in the normalization that marks it.⁶ The women's movement in India has sought to expand the legal definition of violence, firstly, by pointing out that the home or the private domain is a space of violence and

5 Critical consciousness is a social concept developed by renowned Brazilian pedagogue and educational theorist Paulo Freire. See Paulo Friere, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, New York :Sheed and Ward, 1974.

6 See Kalpana Viswanath and Surabhi Tandon Mehrotra 'Shall we go out? Women's Safety in Public Spaces in Delhi' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 28, 2007, 1542-1548. Here p.1542

insecurity. Secondly, the conventional definition of violence is challenged by broadening it beyond acts of physical and sexual aggression to include more subtle forms and mental and emotional violence.⁷ In spite of the laws that are passed to protect women, violence continues unabated. The statistics of the National Crime Records Bureau present a dismal picture of the Indian scenario in relation to women and violence.⁸ While these numbers account only for the recorded crimes, they are like the tip of an iceberg, the greater part is still unknown or unrecognized.

It is important to ask why violence against women, especially in the families, is so normalized? I think the answer lies in the gender prescriptions of what is defined to be the masculine or 'manly' characteristics, and what is delineated to be the feminine or 'womanly' qualities. The gendered socialization of young boys into 'masculine roles' becomes an unwritten code giving them sanction to be self-centered, aggressive, dominating and demanding in the privacy of the domestic space. Whereas the socialization of girls and young women into the 'ideal feminine' with its accompanying behavioural codes of docility, submissiveness, silence, self-giving and self-sacrificing, make them susceptible to suppression and ruthless exploitation in the apparently 'secure' spaces of the homes.

Social theorists observe that violence, gender and space are inextricably linked. It is pointed out that most violence against women occurs in the private, whereas violence against men occur mostly in the public.⁹ What is strange about violence in the domestic space of

7 The Domestic Violence Act enacted in October 2006 defines violence in all its dimensions, going beyond the physical and sexual to the verbal, emotional and economic violence. This definition was taken from the UN Model Code on Domestic Violence and from the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to which India is a party. Cf. V. Venkatesan, "Lacunae in law" in *Frontline*, January 4 2008, p.21.

8 According to the latest National Crime Records Bureau 2007, a total of 1,85,312 incidents of crime against women (both under *Indian Penal Code-IPC* and *Special and Local Laws-SLL*) were reported in the country during 2007 as compared to 1,64,765 during 2006, thus recording an increase of 12.5% during 2007.

9 Cf. Mooney J. 'Violence, Space and Gender: The Social and Spatial Parameters of Violence Against Women and Men' in N. Jewson and Mac Gregor (eds.)

the home is that it is not even considered violence unless it becomes obviously explicit as in wife battering which leaves visible evidence. The different shades of abusive behaviour on the part of men are taken to be expressions of just the way men are, or in some cases they may even be considered as disciplinary action of a male guardian. What is dreadfully dangerous about this intricate linking of violence, gender, and space is that women themselves become active agents of perpetuating violence against women. Mothers themselves will inculcate in their young daughters the 'feminine' servility as the ideal quality of a wife and mother, and become their role models not only in paying unconditional 'service' to the men placed above them, but also in becoming icons of silent suffering.

The religious indoctrination of gender is so deep in women that even educated women perpetuate similar attitudes and behavioural patterns. To give an example, at a Symposium on "*Feminine identity in the Church: Promises and Challenges*" organized not long ago by a major seminary in India, a woman speaker who holds a doctorate, spoke about the increasing breakdown of marriages even among Catholics. And to remedy the situation, her suggestion was: 'women should endure more'. When checked at the time of interventions as to why endurance is only for women, her response was that men do not know how to endure pain and suffering. This kind of entrenched attitudes in women and men explain why crucifixion becomes an every day experience for a great majority of women.

Deconstructing the 'normalization of violence' according to feminist analysts becomes possible only by situating violence 'within the frame of rights and its violations.'¹⁰ Seen from this perspective, the violence of silencing as in the case of Mary, narrated above, becomes a violation of her right to voice and opinion, which is a fundamental right of any

Transforming Cities: Contested Governance and New Spatial Divisions, London: Routledge 1997, as cited by Michelle Jones in 'A Fight About Nothing': Constructions of Domestic Violence, an unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to the Dept. of Gender Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of Adelaide in 2004, on http://www.clasp.org/publications/michaeljohnson_dv.pdf

10 Cf. Kalpana Kannabiran, *The Violence of Normal Times: Essays on Women's Lived Realities*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2005.

adult human person. When women lack decisional power within the family which amounts to a deprivation of women's effective agency, this can adversely affect their own well being, observes Amartya Sen.¹¹ Merciless exploitation of a woman in her role as a 'housewife' as in the case of Lissy, becomes the violation of a woman's right to live with human dignity and respect. Worst still, the mental torture and harassment which provoked a young woman like Shiny to take her life is the violation of the fundamental human right to life, though, referring to the high rate of "suicide" among women, some analysts have suggested that suicide for them "might seem an attractive way out of an intolerable situation."¹²

The life stories, we have heard, also point to the importance of tracing the economic roots of violence against women. As Jayati Ghosh argues, domestic and marital abuse is made more possible when women have fewer points of escape out of such oppressive relationships because of lack of assets or economic security in the form of gainful occupations.¹³ While economic security is the key factor that gives women the power to resist oppressive situations, what really needs to be addressed is the political economy, the structural framework of the patriarchally defined marriage and family systems, and the associated attitudes of domination and subjugation.

Religious Underpinnings of Violence: The Problematic of the Cross

As the starting point of feminist theology is the life experience of women, feminist theologians raise a hermeneutic of suspicion on some of the tenets of conventional theology which serve to give a religious sanction to women's experience of gendered oppression and suffering. The traditional theology of the cross is a major concern in this regard.

For Christianity, the cross is the key symbol of what it is all about. Suffering and salvation has been intrinsically linked in traditional

11 Cf. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History, Identity*, London: Penguin Books 2005, p. 220.

12 Devaki Jain ed., *Indian Women* (Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1975) p. 77.

13 Cf. Jayati Ghosh, 'Structures of Insecurity', *Frontline*, January 4, 2008, p.27.

Christian theology as expressed in Bonhoeffer's much quoted expression "Only a God who suffers can save us." But the exaggerated Christian appeal for the suffering Christ who redeems through his cross has also projected Christianity as 'a religion espoused by grief-stricken people obsessed with suffering' in the words of Nietzsche.

Modern theology of the cross has come a long way off from the theology of Anselm which focuses suffering and death of Jesus on the cross as the necessary satisfaction for sin. However, Jesus' self-sacrifice and violent death on the cross are still taken to be the essential features of the Christian economy of salvation. While the cross continues to nourish Christian faith, the deep association between violence, suffering and salvation poses a problem, especially from the standpoint of those inflicted by suffering. Some argue that 'if violence is the means of redemption, then violence is God's will... This is not a liberating image for women, or for any oppressed peoples. It is not a model of salvation that assures those who suffer that God is on their side'¹⁴

According to feminist theologians, the images of Jesus as sacrificial victim, and his sacrificial love and surrender on the cross are destructive for women.¹⁵ The problem here is 'gendering',¹⁶ whereby submission, sacrificial love and suffering are taken to be the prerogative of women, and this has been greatly justified by the Christian indoctrination. As Mary Daly argues, 'the qualities that Christianity idealizes, especially for women, are also those of the victim: sacrificial

14 Marit Treslstadt (ed) *Cross-Examinations: Interrogating the Cross for its meanings Today* Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2006, as cited by Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Salvation and the Cross" in *Concilium*, 2008/4, pp.55-62, here 56.

15 Cf. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, (Boston: Beacon Press 1973) p. 75-77. This idea is also brought out by Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich*, Washington DC: University Press of America, 1980, pp. 149-174 and Dorothee Soelle, *Beyond Mere Obedience*(New York Pilgrim 1982) pp.54-59.

16 Anne Oakly calls 'gendering', the internalization of the constructed differences by both the sexes which gets normalized as the way of being women and men. Cf. Anne Oakly, *Sex, Gender and Society*(Harper Colophone Books, London 1972) as cited by Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, New Jersey: Zed Books, 1986, p.22.

love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness etc. Since these are qualities idealized in Jesus “who died for our sins”, his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women.’¹⁷

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza finds a theology of the cross as self-giving love even more detrimental than that of obedience, because it colludes with the cultural “feminine”, calling women to self-sacrificing love for the sake of their families. Thus it renders the exploitation of all women in the name of love and self-sacrifice, psychologically acceptable and religiously warranted.¹⁸ The argument is that if one extols the silent and freely chosen suffering of Christ, who was “obedient to death” (Phil 2:8) as an example to be imitated by those victimized by patriarchal oppression, especially those suffering from domestic and sexual abuse, one not only legitimates but also enables acts of violence against women.¹⁹

From a feminist standpoint, the figure of the silent and suffering Mary standing beneath the Cross, offered as a role model to women also poses a problematic. Many feminist theologians find Mary ‘an ambiguous figure in theology’²⁰ The problem arises because Mary, the pure and self-sacrificing, humble handmaiden of the Lord and the mother full of sorrows, is preached to women as the model. A malestream mariology continues to inscribe the socio-cultural image of the feminine that sanctifies the marginalization and exploitation of women.²¹

A Feminist ‘Meaning-making’ of the of the Cross

A critical feminist discussion on the theology of the cross while criticising and rejecting traditional soteriological theories of atonement

17 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p.77.

18 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1999, p. 102.

19 *Ibid*, p.106.

20 Susan A. Ross, “Mary: Human, Feminine, Divine? *Concilium*, 2008/4, pp 27-33, here 27.

21 Cf. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, p. 165

and satisfaction rooted in Anselm, and other Christological precepts that lay stress on Jesus as the self-sacrificing victim, search for new keys to re-interpret the meaning of the cross. Feminist theologians argue that Jesus' death on the cross is not a passive victimization. God did not require a sacrificial death. Jesus dies for the way he lived, and for the commitment of his life and his liberating message. His death is not an expression of passive self-sacrifice, but an active and indeed subversive freedom in relation to God and religious and societal structures.²²

Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams, theologizing against the backdrop of African women's exploitation as surrogate mothers, argues that the image of Jesus on the cross is the image of human sin in its most desecrated form. In her opinion, 'as Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred.'²³ She finds humankind redeemed through Jesus' ministerial vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross.²⁴

Other womanist theologians look at the cross from a different angle. The suffering Christ is not to be seen as a man of sorrows, but as one who could champion their cause. The African mindset understands suffering as birth pangs, which means it has to lead to new beginnings. In this sense Christ suffering is a midwife to the new.²⁵

Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung while acknowledging that 'making meaning out of suffering is a dangerous

22 Cf. Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988, pp.174-75. Most of the liberation theologians also interpret the cross of Jesus in the same way. See J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, London: SCM Press Ltd 1978, and Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ the Liberator: A Critical Christology of Our Time*, London: SPCK, 1980.

23 Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993, p.167.

24 Ibid.

25 Cf. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, . *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic press 2001) in Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies*, Sheffield Academic press. 2001, p.97.

business', asserts that 'Asian women are discovering with much passion and compassion that Jesus takes sides with the silenced Asian women in his solidarity with all oppressed people. This Jesus is Asian women's new lover, comrade and suffering servant.'²⁶

Other feminist theologians like Mary Grey proposes to reweave the metaphor of "at-one-ment" in terms of "the dynamic energy of mutuality and the making of right relation" and to reimage the cross as "creative birth-giving."²⁷ For Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, in the context of Jesus' life, ministry, and his mutuality with women, the cross can be retrieved as a symbol not only of "the guillotine or the gallows" but also of "wholeness and life."²⁸

What is significant to note is that regardless of cultural context, feminist theologians insist that the cross of Jesus is the consequence of his prophetic message and liberating life. Jesus' death was the final act of his lifelong resistance to evil, a death he approached in fidelity to his life's mission and in solidarity with all those who suffer unjustly.²⁹ As Elizabeth Johnson suggests, the cross stands in history as a "life-affirming protest against all torture and injustice, and as a pledge that the transforming power of God is with those who suffer to bring about life for others."³⁰

Looking at the cross of Christ from the Indian perspective, for the women who continue to be crucified as in the life stories of

26 Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1990, p.56

27 Mary Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition*, London SCM Press 1989, p.156 as cited by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, p.100.

28 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, "Gibt es eine feministische Kreuzestheologie," in Eveline Valtink, ed., *Das Kreuz mit dem Kreuz: Hofgeismarer Protokolle* (Hofgeismar: Evangelische Akademie, 1990) 92, as quoted by Schussler Fiorenza in *Jesus, Miriam's Child*, p. 99.

29 Cf. Mary Catherine Hilkert,, *Feminist theology-Key religious symbols: Christ and God*, in *Theological Studies*. 56(2) 1995, 341-352.

30 Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus and Salvation." *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 49 (1994) 1-18 "Jesus and Salvation" 15. as cited by Hilkert., *FeministTheology-Key religious Symbols*. p. 345.

Mary, Lissy and Shiny, and millions who are mentally harassed, physically battered, sexually abused, tortured, killed or led to suicide, how is their experience of suffering to become a 'life-affirming protest against all torture and injustice'? For them, the suffering of Jesus is in no way vicariously empowering. Women who are victims of violence are not to be consoled by identifying with the bleeding Jesus. The cross can make sense only if seen from the perspective of liberation as a symbol that challenges women and men of today to take a stand with prophetic courage for the cause of justice, truth and love. The cross is liberative in those who resist the oppressive regimes and power structures that subjugate millions in the name of class, caste, and gender, and work towards the reversal of the oppressive social orders. The cross has meaning only in resurrection, in the experience of life.

The Crucified Women and Resurrection

Bultmann rightly said "the resurrection is the meaning of the cross."³¹ But my theological concern here is about the resurrection of the crucified women. The shocking silence on the part of the priest who could gloriously celebrate the 'death and resurrection of Jesus Christ' on a Sunday morning without even mentioning the ghastly 'crucifixion' of a woman of that community the previous day, makes me wonder if the question of crucified women's resurrection would have any significance for the mainstream theology. All the same, my feminist theological task is to examine if the notion of resurrection has any meaning for women who continue to experience crucifixion.

Like other forms of liberation theology, feminist theologies of the resurrection highlight that the crucified one was not abandoned and that evil does not have the last word. The focus of feminist scholarship is not primarily on what happened to Jesus of Nazareth, but rather on the role of Mary Magdalene and the women as primary witnesses to the resurrection, the experience of the Spirit of the risen one in the post-resurrection communities, and women's experiences of crucifixion

31 R. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, Edinburgh University Press 1957 as cited by J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p.262

and resurrection.³² Schussler Fiorenza opines that 'positioning contemporary feminist discourses on the theology of the cross within the rhetorical space of the 'empty tomb' as an ambiguous 'open space', allows us to reclaim this space of resurrection for women's meaning-making today in the face of dehumanization and oppression.'³³ The 'empty tomb' does not signify absence but presence: it announces the Resurrected One's presence on the road ahead, in a particular space of struggle and recognition such as Galilee.³⁴

Feminist writings point to a significant connection between the empty tomb tradition and the importance of the body. As Sharon Bong argues, 'a theology that matters is one that is embodied...bodies that suffer, bodies that resist and bodies that heal constitute the life blood, sinew, and fibre of Christian theologies from Asia.'³⁵

Women's experience of violence is very much an embodied experience. Hence my theological concern again is: how are the crucified women vindicated here and now? What could be their possibility for experiencing life and freedom in an embodied way? Where is that 'space of struggle and recognition such as Galilee' in concrete life, that they too may experience this resurrection?

Today, there is a general acceptance of hope as the hermeneutic horizon for understanding the resurrection.³⁶ Christian hope is hope when it does not evade the suffering and evil of injustice but confronts it and transforms it. Felix Wilfred looks at injustice and the consequent

32 Cf. Hilbert, 'Feminist theology-Key religious symbols', p. 346.

33 Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child*, pp. 124-25.

34 Ibid., p.126

35 Sharon A.Bong, 'The Suffering Christ and the Asian Body' in Janet martin Soskice and Diana Lipton (eds) *Feminism and Theology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp.356-364, here pp. 356-57.

36 Celebrated theologians such as Moltmann, Pannenberg and Metz are known as "theologians of hope". But Mary Daly contends that writing long treatises on creative hope without any specific acknowledgement of or application to specific forms of injustice, makes it irrelevant in the sense that it lacks specific grounding in the concrete experiences of the oppressed. Cf. Mary Daly, Cf. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p.20.

suffering as evil in everyday life,³⁷ and argues that evil needs to be confronted with prophetic anger. In his opinion, 'the force of prophetic anger is derived from the fact that it addresses evil very concretely and with reference to a specific context. Only when placed within a context that the nature of evil stand out in all its horror. The challenge then becomes powerful that evil cannot take shelter under convenient pretexts.'³⁸

We find prophetic anger expressed today by individuals and groups involved in the liberative struggles of people in social movements and organizations, addressing issues of women, Dalits or any other subaltern groups, ecology and the like. Whether from the institutions or grassroots, when there is a life-affirming protest against injustice and oppression, then it becomes the road to Galilee. On this road, Jesus can be, as J. B. Metz observes, a 'dangerous memory' in the struggle for justice.³⁹ Prophetically 'dangerous memory' is also a liberative memory. In the prophetic lives of those committed to justice and liberation, crucifixion and resurrection are not separated. Their voices will echo Oscar Romero who asserted two weeks before his assassination "If they kill me, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people."

Resurrection of the crucified women then, becomes a possibility in the voices raised in prophetic anger whether from the pulpit or the street, in the media or within the four walls of the homes. Today the question is, as Felix Wilfred points out, 'not why people rebel... but why they do not rebel and rise up in protest, in spite of the fact that evil is not abated'⁴⁰ Unless and until the injustice of violence in women's lives is addressed, will hope become a real experience for them. Joining hands in the women's struggle for empowerment and liberation then is the locus of their resurrection.

37 Felix Wilfred, "Prophetic Anger and Sapiential compassion: Grappling with evil Today" *Concilium*, 2009/1, London: SCM Press, pp.27-38. here 28.

38 Ibid., p. 34.

39 Metz Joannes- Baptist and Edward Schillebeeckx, eds. *God as father?*, *Concilium* 143, New York Seabury Press, 1981.

40 Felix Wilfred, "Prophetic Anger and Sapiential compassion: Grappling with evil Today". p. 30.

Recently I saw a poster with the picture of a woman crying out from the flames with the words: "*when you die, you lose your pleasure...when I die I lose my pain.*" The picture reminded me of Shiny, and I think her very death is a protest of the life negating forces. In my narration of her story is a protest of the dehumanizing violence that mark our Christian homes, and also of the indifferent silence of the ministers of the church to such heinous crimes. In the protest there is resurrection because life is reclaimed. Through the protest, life is re-envisioned as a new tapestry re-woven with strands of peace, justice and love, in the place of torture and distress, and that again is the experience of resurrection. Even those who are being crucified like Mary and Lissy are resurrected, in their very survival in spite of and through their affliction, and in their openness and courage to narrate their stories. Their voice is a protest against the patriarchally defined marriage and family which is upheld by religion. Making their voices heard is like lifting the bronze serpent in the desert, a sign that can purge the destructive venom of violence from the lives of women.

Conclusion

Having touched the experiences of crucifixion in the lives of women, we have also seen briefly what could lead them to experiences of resurrection. Leonardo Boff views Jesus' resurrection in terms of the proclamation of God's kingdom as liberation.⁴¹ Certainly, liberation is the key to the 'politics of the Reign of God,'⁴² for which Jesus lived, died and is risen. The *politics* of the Reign of God implies a reversal of the *politics of domination* in human hearts and in societal structures. In keeping with the Reign of God politics, power is not a weapon of control, silencing and exclusion, but becomes a resource that enables the other to freedom and life. Experience of life giving power is resurrection for those who are being crucified today.

41 Cf. Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ the Liberator*, p.134-135

42 I borrow this expression from Sandra Schneiders, who speaks of prophetic obedience as the politics of the Reign of God. Cf. Sandra Schneiders, "Religious Life in the Future", available on site www.catholic.org.tw/amrsmw/schneiders.doc

Schussler Fiorenza understands the *basileia* (the Reign of God) as the 'prophetic Divine Wisdom-Sophia movement', which again is an emancipatory movement. It is an ongoing and inclusive movement of prophets and messengers sent to Israel by Divine Wisdom, of which Jesus is a part as *primus inter pares*, first among equals.⁴³ Fiorenza asserts: 'Just as she has called Jesus of Nazareth in the past, so also still today, Divine Wisdom-Sophia calls her wo/men ministers from all corners of the earth to foment the radical change demanded by the vision of *basileia* of God, understood as Divine Wisdom's alternative world of well-being and salvation.'⁴⁴ The risen Christ continues to live embodied in those who have become or are becoming the '*friends of God and the prophets*' (Wis 7:27). Through the prophets of today, the poor receive the good news, the blind recover their sight, and the oppressed taste liberty (cf. Lk 4:18-19).

When women and men join hands in solidarity, and in their struggle for justice and equality, the prophetic Divine Wisdom-Sophia movement becomes a concrete experience in the lives of the marginalized, and those weighed down by the yoke of oppression. The anguish of those who continue to be crucified calls for responses with a prophetic urgency, as reflected in the following poem:

' *This is what I am: watching the spider
rebuild- "patiently" they say,
but I recognize in her
impatience -my own-
the passion to make and make again
where such unmaking reigns.*

- Adrienne Rich

"Natural Resources"

The Dream of a Common Language

Dept. of Christian Studies

University of Madras

Chennai – 600 005

E Mail: kochuabraham@gmail.com

43 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Prophet of Divine Wisdom-Sophia" in Patrick Gananapragasam and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (eds) *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, pp.59-76.

44 *Ibid.*, p.76.

“Where Is Your Sister?”

Alice Erani

In the rural India women experience cruel discrimination because they are *women*. The poorest of the poor and the dalits of the dalits among them experience the worst forms of discrimination. The author of this article who lives with these discriminated women along with her team of collaborators makes a theological reflection on her experience of being with this deprived section of the society in North Karnataka. God confronted Cain with a question, ‘Where is your brother?’ because God heard the cry of the blood of Abel whose life was taken away by Cain. Today, in many parts of the world where women whose life as real humans is taken away by a patriarchal society with its oppressive customs and practices, and in the midst of the struggle of women to recover the meaning of their lives as humans, God asks this question to all men, “Where is your sister?”.

Alice Erani, SJC, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, is a lawyer and social activist, involved in empowering rural women in North Karnataka. She lives along with some of her sisters in *insertion communities* they have initiated among the rural poor called ‘*New Presence*’ among the poor.

“Nature has given women so much power that the law has very wisely given them very little”— Samuel Johnson.

It was a Thursday in 1999 and the fourth day in school for little Renuka from a remote village in North Karnataka- a luxury for a girl in that part of the country. On her return from school that evening she asked her grandma. “My teacher always calls me ‘Renuka

Basappa'. Why can't she call me 'Renuka Basamma'? (Her mother's name is Basamma). A very simple question from a little village girl next door; but it reflects the perennial question that arises in the hearts of the largely *unseen* and *unheard* half of humanity whom society likes to address as the 'fair sex' or 'weaker sex'. Renuka's question was not answered - perhaps there is no satisfying answer. And I am convinced that the world is still on track because of those who dare to ask the disturbing question *why* to the blatant injustices of one section of humans to the other.

From the time I was a little girl, I have been intrigued by the reality of the two most serious ways people are discriminated against in our society that is - on the basis of caste and gender. And it has been very comforting to find individuals and groups who share the same concern. Coming face to face with the raw reality in the rural life of north Karnataka I have come to realize that gender discrimination is crueler and more suffocating than caste discrimination as this comes from outside your home and your community whereas gender discrimination is right there in your home, in the midst of whom you hold closest to you - father, husband, son as well as from outside. That means gender discrimination threatens to crush the human person from every side.

Living for the past 17 years in insertion communities in the very backward part of north Karnataka in solidarity with the rural poor, I experience within me the pain of discrimination and marginalization the poor women in the villages go through day after day simply because they are *women*. And these experiences have sharpened my vision of the mission I feel called to fulfil. "The impossibility of remaining silent on a subject is an observation that can be made about many cases of injustice that move us to rage in a way that is hard for our language to capture. And yet any analysis of injustice would also demand clear articulation and reasoned scrutiny."¹

And today I would like to reflect on this unjust discrimination and subjugation experienced from day to day by my poor rural sisters in this part of the world well aware that this is the experience of women worldwide (especially of poor women and more especially of dalit women) for "Injustice anywhere affects justice everywhere". The

1 Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, London: Penguin Books, 2009, p.1

deprivation of equality women experience as a result of gender discrimination is mainly on three levels:

- women's right to free choices in life
- women's freedom of expression
- women's right to opportunities for growth

1. Depriving Women of their Right to make Choices in their Lives

Women are made equal to men but they are made unequal by the society controlled by a patriarchal system that not only makes discriminatory laws and conventions but also creates symbols and myths to make women internalize them. In many parts of the rural India those ordinary, illiterate women accept such rules and regulations that keep them in a state of oppression and dehumanization without questioning the validity of such customs and practices. Sometimes both the perpetrators and the victims are not aware that they are violating the human dignity of a woman

Gangamma was a cute six year old attending the coaching classes for non school going children in one of the villages. On one Saturday during the games I noticed that this otherwise bubbly bundle of energy was standing quietly in a corner. When I called her to join in, the other children said in chorus "She can't play. She is married." She was married two days ago. In north Karnataka, child marriage is commonplace and most of the time the husband is much older. It may horrify us to know that deprivation in such an important matter of life to choose a partner in life is legitimized by the society. It is a generally accepted fact that girls in rural India have no say in the choice of their husbands. But what I want to point out here is the imposition of social restriction on a poor little girl like Gangamma because of an event she does not even understand. And more importantly the married boy has no such restrictions. Discrimination of women in the society in which Jesus lived is well narrated in the story of the 'woman caught in adultery' who was brought to be stoned while the man involved in the case was left scot-free. Society accepts this as the norm and finds nothing wrong with this partisan attitude. When would humans grow to recognize, accept and provide opportunities to all humans, male or female, young or old to choose their destiny without any external or internal compulsions? When will 'the old order change yielding place to the

new' where a girl or a woman is not discriminated against just because of her gender?

Today the freedom of choice is the monopoly of one half of humanity. All need to recognize that this is **unjust**. The struggle to reclaim justice denied has been going on for centuries. As Medha Patkar says, "*The struggle is on for those for whom struggle itself is a way of life.*" In this struggle women and men need to join hands. Men need to say, "My sister's concern is my concern".

2. Preventing Women from Exercising their Freedom of Expression

In many of the rural societies of India women have no right to express themselves freely without being labelled indecent and uncultured. Sadly enough, a woman is constantly reminded by the society that she is inferior because she is different from man through refrains like "Remember you are a woman" or "A woman is not supposed to speak in public like this or do like this". This marginalisation of woman is so ingrained in our society that many mothers internalize these patriarchal injunctions and train their daughters to accept such conventions without questioning. Women are not free to express directly their views on matters concerning their lives or the family or the society in which they live. In rural areas where a large majority of people are illiterate, inhuman traditions of a feudal system still prevail and control the destiny of women. It is not easy to resist this imposed subordination to men. Some may wonder whether such attitude is still prevalent in our society.

Women in north Karnataka have the custom of covering their heads with the *pallu* of their sari (which would cover even a greater part of their face all through the day) even while making rotis in their dimly lit kitchen. When asked why they do it they say, "It is dishonorable for a woman not to cover her head". This type of internalization of subjugation is the same whichever religion one belongs to. Women are denied their freedom of expression sometimes through violent reprisal. It was not long ago that there were violent protests all over Karnataka in the name of an article that appeared in a vernacular daily concerning the 'burqua' allegedly written by Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen which she had denied. The phenomena of devaluing the contributions of women to their societies through ideas, visions and plans were also

present in the western societies in course of their history of discovering the dignity of women as human beings. George Eliot was the penname adopted by the writer Mary Ann Evans. It is said that she did it to prevent the discrimination experienced by the women of her era and to avoid prejudice to her writings. The issue is not rejecting any ideas and reflections because of their lack of relevance to the life of society but because their source is a woman. It is not the question of 'what one said' but 'who said it'.

3. Depriving Women of their Opportunities to grow

Except, perhaps, in advanced societies there is no concerted efforts among the leaders and administrators of the society to provide opportunities to women to grow and unfold themselves as human beings. In all spheres of life, opportunities are denied to them to fulfil their destiny in this world as evolved human beings. In many societies they have to fight their way to get a minimum space to live a life worthy of their vocation as women. The Church, being a counter-culture society, should have been the champion of the cause of women, because both the Scripture and the teaching of the Church, believe, confess and proclaim the equality of women and men. It is a fundamental belief of the Church that all humans are the images of God and in baptism they become as one Body with Christ. But in reality, the Church too cannot be absolved from its responsibilities to promote gender equality and stand against any form of injustice done to women. During a group discussion in the course of a workshop for priests and religious on Gender Justice in one of the dioceses, one of the participants, a young priest said, "There is no gender discrimination in the Church". Either he was blind to reality or did not want to acknowledge it being too conscious of his responsibility to protect and defend the Church. Some years ago I participated in a meeting of theologians where the topic for discussion was the *Empowerment of Women*. One of the women participants drew the attention of the group to the need for the men in the Church especially theologians to support women's initiatives in the Church. And immediately one of the priests, got up and responded in a very patronizing manner, "If you women want to be empowered, go out and join the secular groups and don't beg for support from within the Church for you won't get it". Was he cynical about the attitude of the Church towards women? Was he speaking in the name of the

Church or expressing his patronizing attitude towards women or making a statement that he is not committed to collaborate with women to secure their rights from the patriarchal society? Sometimes, implied in such observations is a refusal to answer directly to the soul-searching question of God, (paraphrased for the present situation of women) "Where is your sister?" responded with a counter question; "Am I my sister's keeper?"

How do we explain this attitude of non commitment on the part of so-called enlightened people who claim to stand for the values of the Kingdom which Jesus preached and lived in his life. In fact, discrimination, inequality, marginalization are words that should be alien to a Christian; for in Christ Jesus there is no male or female, no Jew or Gentile - all are one. But these realities are in no way less in the Church than in the world. Indeed both women and men are the images of God and created equal according to Christian faith but it is only in the grave they stay together without any discrimination. Isn't that strange?

Jesus' Attitude to the Victims of Discrimination

In the midst of my every day experience of dealing with women who are crushed under the burden of intolerable discrimination in their families, in their communities and the wider society I ask this question to myself, "How would Jesus have responded to this situation of injustice, oppression and dehumanization?" Jesus came to give hope to the hopeless and voice to the voiceless. (In fact, nobody is voiceless; either their voice is smothered or not listened to.) Jesus recognizes these disadvantaged, discriminated against section of humanity to say that his kingdom is an inclusive one. In his dream of the new society there is no discrimination. For Jesus, women and men were equal. Those whom society considered low, insignificant, outcast namely, the widow at the temple treasury, the Canaanite woman, Mary Magdalene are held up by Jesus as examples of authenticity and integrity. To Him their silent presence was more eloquent than their words.

In asking "Who touched me?" (Mk 5:31-34) amidst a crowd pushing around him and praising the faith of the woman with hemorrhage, wasn't Jesus exalting womanhood in a society that despised women? Perhaps she was the only woman among so many men around Jesus for it was not customary for Jewish women to appear in public. I

would like to think that Jesus was consciously raising the visibility of a woman in a society that eclipsed its female species all the time. That was Jesus' way of proactively responding to discrimination and challenge all those around him including his disciples to look into their attitude towards women. I would like to think that on the part of Jesus it was a form of raising the dead who were daily being murdered by a society through its discrimination and marginalization of women.

Jesus challenged the social, religious and political systems that were discriminative and oppressive to women because for Jesus every woman was his sister. I think there lies the key to gender justice. Then men will be rid of their undue fear of letting women have their due. How else does one explain the hue and cry against the 33% reservation for women in the parliament? It is only justice that when half of the citizens of the country are female, the same percentage should be at the level of the government.

An Attitude of Inclusiveness versus Marginalisation

Inclusiveness is a very positive and powerful word. In it there is no room for inequality or discrimination. But our society is wary of embracing it with regard to women. We believe that the greatest solidarity of people whoever and wherever they are is that they are all *human beings*. Jesus upheld the primacy of human life and challenged the structures that were against it. He could break the barriers that separated Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, so called sinners and so called righteous. The price he had to pay for that was his own life. But His death brought life in abundance. His paradigm of creating a situation where women can discover their true identity and enhance it by themselves in solidarity with others is a challenge to every woman and man who is committed to the cause of women.

The Church needs to continue the mission of Jesus striving to live and proclaim the all-inclusive attitude of Jesus. Often a valid critique is made on the Church that depends on women for its number for membership and work but every decision making power is vested in men. If the Church wills it, it can initiate the change, walk the different path of non discrimination and spearhead the movement towards a new world of Justice and equality in the world.

“The notion of human rights builds on our shared humanity”.² Our primary identity is that we are all human beings. This truth needs to be brought home strongly through creative and effective means. The women who are made to be divided on the basis of caste, religion and region need to cross these boundaries and experience the beauty and power of togetherness as women. And then they will see their discrimination as violation of human rights and be able to convince men of goodwill to join their march towards Freedom, *Justice and Fellowship*.

Can we dare dream of a world where nobody will be persecuted and killed for upholding the dignity of another fellow being but on the other hand will respect and honour them and where women and men will enjoy life in fullness and share it with each other?

The Challenge before Us

In my close association with the rural women what has amazed me and continues to do so is their **resilience** in the face of inhuman discrimination and the resultant deprivation with regard to wages, education, rest, decision making in the family and village, etc. Their resilience is not a helpless resignation to the situation or being a victim or of fatalism. But it is powerful forms of resistance to subjugation, refusal to be cowed down – a resistance more powerful than an armed combat. In the process of facilitating their empowerment I was empowered. These illiterate women taught me to overcome the temptation not to retreat in the face of opposition and suppression, rejection and ridicule. Was this not the way of the cross Our Master himself embraced even when those closest to him tried to dissuade him? “Get behind me Satan”, he said to Peter. The oppressed and suppressed women taught me to enter into a process of liberation by recognizing that first of all, **we need to face the fact and take up resistance in a nonviolent way.**

To empower women to stand for their rights as humans in a society we need to collaborate with all humans of good will beyond the borders of our religion, class, caste, language and gender. Therefore it is imperative that *we help build solidarity beyond borders*. Today with the modern means of communication there is great possibility of net-

working in our struggle for building a new humanity of God’ plan. “We are increasingly linked not only by our mutual economic, social and political relations, but also by vaguely shared but far reaching concerns about justice and inhumanity that challenge our world and the violence and terrorism that threaten it. Even our shared frustrations and thoughts on global helplessness can unite rather than divide”.³ The means of communication can be rightly used to build solidarity among the people of good will who dream of society where humans can live as brothers and sisters with equal rights. But in a world of globalization, communication is manipulated to increase the financial profit of some and deprivation of many. Many become oblivious to the situation of injustice and discrimination happening in their own families and societies. This demands that those who are concerned about all forms of discrimination share together their resources to accelerate the process of securing the rights of women as human beings.

In some remote villages of North Karnataka relating with many women who are struggling to discover their true humanity in a harsh world in which the process of their life and destiny is determined, controlled and suppressed by those men who refuse to see these women as humans, I see God looking with compassion at this situation of deprivation and discrimination for “God has given so much power to women most of which the law made by man has taken away.” Can we help restore them? It only takes a spark to get a fire going. Can we be that spark?

Can we be sparks that ignite the drooping spirits of our sisters and brothers? Have we that conviction and courage of Jesus to continue the mission of empowering women to struggle to secure their rights as humans. Finally, I wish that **we become the change we want to make!**

Cluny Sisters, Navachetana
Kundgol. P.O. 581113
Dharwad Dt. Karnataka.
E-mail: alicesjc@gmail.com

The Power of the Bleeding Woman: A Rereading of Mark 5: 21-34

Shalini Mulackal

In India a vast majority of women still experience gender-based discrimination, lack of freedom, self-determination and the space to develop their full human potential, irrespective of their caste, class, or religious affiliation. Both in the private and public spheres of their life they experience that their freedom is curtailed. Opportunities are denied to them to become what they ought to become as humans. Indeed, they experience certain powerlessness. In this article the author makes an attempt to understand the significance of the bleeding woman in the Gospel of Mark 5: 21-34 in the context of Indian women of Dalit origins. What are the similarities between this Gospel woman who appropriated 'power' from Jesus and the struggling Dalit women of today? In what ways can this bleeding woman of Galilee function as a powerful symbol for the bleeding Dalit women of India to liberate themselves from the shackles that confine them to remain victims of an unjust system? The deep faith of some Dalit women in the power of Jesus and in the intercession of his mother to heal them and their experience of being healed empower them to become agents of liberation.

The author, Shalini Mulackal PBVM, is a member of the faculty of Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi and teaches Systematic Theology. She is a visiting professor at various other theological faculties and institutes in India. She is involved in the activities of different women-empowerment groups.

Introduction

Human societies have come a long way in terms of scientific and technological development together with advancement in all the other areas of life - social, political, economic and cultural. All these have an impact on human relationships and the status of women in a given society. In India, the status of women has been changing from time to time. The 21st century India is a fast changing one in every respect. Women's situation too is changing. Today more and more women are getting opportunities for education, employment, and they play many other roles besides being a wife and mother. Women have entered practically all walks of life though not in great numbers. But this is not the whole picture. A vast majority of Indian women still experience gender-based discrimination, lack of freedom, self-determination and the space to develop their full human potential, irrespective of their caste, class, or religious affiliation. They experience lack of freedom and certain amount of powerlessness both at home and in the public sphere. This experience of powerlessness deepens when it is combined with other factors such as poverty, caste discrimination, religious fundamentalism, orthodoxy, etc.

The situation of women of Dalit origins in India is a case in point. They experience multi-layered oppression. For centuries they had been bleeding with no apparent cure in sight. This paper is an attempt to understand the significance of the bleeding woman in the Gospel of Mark in the context of Indian women of Dalit origins. What are the similarities between this Gospel woman who appropriated 'power' from Jesus and the struggling Dalit women of today? In what ways can this bleeding woman of Galilee can function as a powerful symbol for the bleeding Dalit women?

1. Dalit Context

To be a Dalit means to be stigmatized from birth as spiritually defiling and therefore potential polluters of "clean" high-caste people. Their touch, voice, and even their shadow were believed to pollute caste Hindus. According to Manu Smṛti, the untouchable categories can be divided into persons, animals and things. The untouchable persons include the candala and other outcastes, the

*woman in confinement, the menstruating woman, the corpse and the toucher of a corpse and the patita (a severe violator of moral laws).*¹

Legally the Dalits are no longer untouchables, though in practice many of them still bear that stigma and suffer discrimination. India's ex-untouchables, the Dalits, lived for centuries in segregated hamlets and villages and continue to live that way even to the present day. High castes denied them the use of public wells, as well as entry to schools, shops, and high-caste shrines, and forced them to perform the most despised and defiling jobs of their society: exhausting unskilled physical labor, scavenging, cleaning latrines, and carrying off dead animals.² Derogatory terms are often used to address a Dalit.

Being a Dalit means to be at the receiving end. Dalits are always at the mercy of the so-called higher castes. Reports of atrocities against Dalits - rape, torture, stripping and parading naked and brutal killings - are not rare even in this 21st century. Numerous are the ways used to keep the Dalits in their subjugated and oppressed condition. Basing his study of untouchability on the texts of *Parasara Smṛti* and its medieval commentary, Aktor makes the following observation:

Untouchables came to represent the final limits at all levels of life in this community. They formed the outer extreme of lordship and possession, as 'masters' of dogs and donkeys; of kinship, as the lowest *pratiloma* group; of *samsara*, as the lowest human birth; of life, as the scavengers of death; of normativeness, as executioners; and of the spatial territories of *dharma*, by being confined to these areas.³

Besides, being socially stigmatized and excluded, majority of Dalits are economically poor. It is estimated that around 40 per cent of the

1 See M. Aktor, "Untouchables, women and territories: rituals of lordship in the *Parasara Smṛti*," in Leslie, M. and McGee M. (ed). (2000) *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000):137

2 See J. Freemann, *Untouchable, An Indian Life history* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1993): 4-5.

3 Aktor, "Untouchables, women and territories " 152

Indian population still live below the poverty line and 80 per cent of the Dalits belong to this category.⁴ Inequality in distribution of sources of income coupled with exploitation of labour, unemployment, and corruption at all levels of Indian society, continue to perpetuate dalitization of poverty. And poverty causes endemic hunger, malnutrition and low resistance to various sicknesses. Poverty also leads to many social ills like child labour, prostitution and *Devadasi* system. Moreover, poverty is the cause of the high level of illiteracy among the Dalits and finally it leaves them as a politically powerless group.

“I have observed the misery of my people who in Egypt: I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them....” (Exodus 3: 7-8) From the Biblical perspective the oppressed and marginalized Dalits in India come under the preferential option of God. Yahweh, the God of the poor and the afflicted continues to listen to their cry. There are a number of instances in the Bible where the poor, the needy, the sick and the suffering ones find solace, comfort and well being in the person of Jesus who came ‘to announce the Good News to the poor.’ We now focus on one such instance where a suffering woman takes a bold step to get healed of her sickness that seems to make her feel a social outcaste besides the physical disability.

2. The Bleeding Woman of Galilee

This particular story is one of the six healings involving female characters in the synoptic tradition. Of these, three violate cultural norms.⁵ The woman with the hemorrhage and the Syrophenician woman stand out as strongly challenging the dominant culture both in Jesus’ violation of purity boundaries and in the portrayal of women who violate the prescriptive norms for women’s behaviour. They are probably the most subversive of all the healings in the synoptic tradition.⁶

4 See Felix Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity* (Madras: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 1995): 106.

5 The stories of Jairus, the woman with the haemorrhage, and the Syrophenician woman

6 See J. Dewey, “Jesus’ Healings of Women,” in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. 24, No. 3, (1994): 122- 131 at 130.

The social setting where the bleeding woman obtains a healing from Jesus is the Jewish Galilee. Jesus and his disciples had previously been in the Gentile region of the Decapolis among the herds of swine (Mk 5:11-20); but now they “cross again in the boat to the other side” (Mk 5: 21) – that is, back to the western bank of the Galilean sea. Reading this text from a Dalit context, one cannot but make an immediate connection between the ‘gentile region’ with ‘the herds of swine’ and a Dalit colony/cherri/wada which is usually situated away from the main village where the so called upper caste people live. One can almost imagine Jesus and his disciples returning to the territory of the ‘upper caste’ after his ministry in the Dalit colony.

In this particular narrative, we meet a bleeding woman who interrupts the Jairus’ story, invades Jesus’ private space, and according to many interpreters, intrudes into a crowd where she would not have been welcome.⁷ Today most scholars consider her story not as an extraneous literary intrusion but as a skillfully designed intercalation with the story of Jairus’s daughter.⁸

It is good to recall at this point the situation of women in Jewish society at the time of Jesus. Women suffered all the disadvantages which a patriarchal society inflicts on them. Consequently, women were considered inferior. Jewish society frowned on women making an appearance in public. A rabbi never greeted a woman in public. It was considered below his dignity. On the other hand it was a mark of immodesty for a woman to engage in a conversation with a man in public. That is why the disciples were surprised to see Jesus speaking to a woman at the well (Jn 4: 27). The extent to which Jewish society looked down upon women is evident from the rabbinical dictum which says that every man should thank God every day for not having been born a woman any more than he had been born a pagan or a proletarian.

According to both the priestly regulations of Leviticus and rabbinic rules of the Mishnah, a woman who is menstruating or has an irregular

7 See F Scott Spencer, *Dancing Girls, “Loose” Ladies, and Women of “the Cloth”* (New York/London: Continuum, 2004), 58.

8 Note that both the stories feature “twelve years.” “daughter,” and healing through touch.

bloody discharge was considered a powerful source of pollution to men. She is unclean (Lev 15: 19-30). Yet, we are not sure to what extent, the Galilean peasant women observed the laws of menstrual purity at the time of Jesus. Today scholars also debate about the ethnicity of this woman. She could well be a gentile who does not come under the purity laws of the Jews. Yet, there is a possibility of subordinate groups internalizing the value systems of the dominant group, including here the understanding of menstruating women, or women with an irregular flow, as unclean. Since this woman suffered for twelve long years, it is almost impossible for her not to consider herself as unclean.

We had been told that this woman had been suffering for twelve years. Whether she is of Jewish or gentile origin, the woman would have known how unwelcome or even repulsive her presence would be amidst Jewish men because of her gender and also of her bodily ailment which could be considered as polluting according to the strict interpretation of the Mosaic law found in Leviticus. For years she "had spent all that she had" on physicians' fees (5: 26). She is no stranger to wealth but now she is one of those made poor, because of the extended medical care she had been receiving.

Her present situation seems to be pathetic. She appears to be nobody's wife, but a single, unattached woman. Her single status could be taken as her marginal position in society; no man would have her because of her bleeding disorder. The story does not reveal her marital status or her sexual history. Joanna Dewey notes that she has no status, in contrast to the derivative status of the daughter of the synagogue leader, "she is destitute and apparently without male kin to protect her."⁹ The only familial connection that emerges in this story is Jesus' adoption of her as his 'daughter' (Mk 5: 34). This reference is often viewed as an indication of her alienation from society. The Compassionate One accepts her when no one else will.

This hemorrhaging woman was suffering terribly, and no one could help her. Jesus' acceptance of this woman springs not from his extra

9 See J. Dewey, "The Gospel of Mark," in E. Schussler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 2: A Feminist Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 470-509, here at 481-2.

ordinary compassion but from recognizing her active faith: "Daughter, your faith has made you well" (Mk 5: 34).¹⁰ Going back to her story, most commentators assume that the woman suffers from irregular uterine bleeding that renders her permanently unclean and untouchable according to Mosaic Law. But Jewish scholars such as Shaye Cohen, Ross Kraemer, Amy-Jill Levine, and Paula Fredriksen have challenged this stereotype.¹¹ Whatever may be the Torah restrictions regarding her physical condition, the most telling point against a purity-oriented interpretation of the bleeding woman's story is that Mark says nothing about it.

The bleeding woman does not pollute Jesus by her touch but instead she does extract therapeutic power from his body. Without his knowledge, will and wish, power goes out from Jesus. Though powerless, the bleeding woman appropriates healing power from Jesus. As Jesus heads to Jairus' house to heal his dying child, Jesus apparently does not intend to heal anyone else along the way. Though a large crowd "presses in" on Jesus (Mk 5: 29), the narrator does not report any other miraculous healing. The focus is on Jairus' daughter, not on the crowds –until the hemorrhaging woman stops the proceedings. Knowing that power had gone forth from him without his permission, Jesus inquires, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mk 5: 30).

Jesus' response seems to say that he perceives this 'touch' as a sort of stealing or as a personal insult.¹² Unlike other healing miracles, where the person spontaneously breaks in to praise and thanksgiving, here the woman falls down "before" Jesus with "fear and trembling" (Mk 5: 33). She is not sure how Jesus would react to her intrusion. Instead of reprimanding her, Jesus commends the woman's faith for stopping her bleeding and making her "whole" and embraces her as "daughter." It is in this context where the woman herself takes the initiative to obtain a cure that Mary Rose D'Angelo proposes that this narrative be renamed as "the women who healed herself."¹³

10 See Spencer, *Dancing Girls*, 59.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, 60.

13 See Marie-Eloise Rosensblatt, "Gender, Ethnicity, And Legal Considerations in the Haemorrhaging Woman's Story" (Mark 5: 25- 34)

This story portrays the woman not requesting but claiming her own healing. She works her way through the crowd. If she was Jewish, she seems to have set aside all purity laws. Being a woman she should not have been in the public in the first place. She is not just a normal woman but in the eyes of the law she is capable of polluting others by her touch. All the more, she certainly should not have been mingling in a crowd while suffering an irregular flow of blood.

Further, if the bleeding woman was to observe proper female shame, and maintain the honour of the males around her, she should not have told in the public what she had done. But when Jesus compels her to speak the truth, she acts as subject and authors her own story. According to the dominant view of the time, the woman behaves shamelessly in seeking and touching Jesus and publicly confessing what she has done. In fact she challenges the cultural norms. Calling her as "daughter" Jesus affirms the woman who stepped outside of the dominant male view of the appropriate role for women.¹⁴

On the other hand, if the haemorrhaging woman is gentile, levitical purity laws (Lev 15: 19-30) do not apply to her, though they may to Jesus. We still need to pay attention to certain factors which do not depend on her ethnicity but rather on her gender. Some of these include the fact that she has not been able to become pregnant, and seems to still be in her child-bearing years, and that she had sufficient wealth to spend it all on physicians. Now that she has lost all her resources, "she had become part of the population whose lack of financial resources made them dependent on itinerant healers when the techniques of folk medicine routinely practiced in the family were not effective."¹⁵

The woman's thought, "If I but touch his clothes" (Mark 5: 28) is linked biblically and thematically with gentiles seeking affiliation with Jews.¹⁶ Moreover, her gentile identity is underlined by Jesus'

in Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed. *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed* (London. Boston. Köln: Brill, 2000), 137- 161 at 150.

14 See Dewey, "Jesus' Healings of Women," 128.

15 As quoted in Rosensblatt, "Gender, Ethnicity, And Legal Considerations....," 154.

16 "Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying,

confirmation of her healing and her new socio-religious status as “daughter” (Mk 5: 34). This vocative acknowledges that she is no longer a stranger but has a place in the family. Being called daughter, she is dignified by an acknowledgement that she is a member of the household of the faith.¹⁷

The hermeneutical benefits of her gentile identity may outweigh the interpretive fruit of assuming she is Jewish. Her social plight characterizes all women in the Mediterranean region and beyond. She embodies the anguish of women who are nameless and are struggling to meet their basic needs. In Jewish imagination, this bleeding woman who takes hold of Jesus is a particularly apt symbol for women who feel abandoned or alone, or whose family bonds have been shattered by war or suppressed political rebellions.¹⁸ Depicting the actions of this woman, taking place within a Jewish world, Mark makes her accessible textually and homiletically to both gentile and Jewish women as a model of persistence and self-determination in relation to Jesus.

“The haemorrhaging woman, whose ethnic heritage is masked, represents both the marginality of women because of their racial identity, and the universality of women’s experience of discrimination based on gender and ethnicity.”¹⁹ When the woman is imaged as a gentile, the story focuses on the restoration of the woman’s fecundity, her emergence from female voiceless anonymity, and respect for the power of her witness before both the male disciples and the great crowd, a testimony which confirms their faith in Jesus. Her alliance with a young Jewish girl represents a sisterhood among women, no matter what their ethnicity.

3. The *Bleeding Dalit Women*

At this juncture I would like to focus our attention on another group of women who are marginalized on account of their caste, class and

‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’ “ (Zech. 8: 23).

17 See Rosensblatt, “Gender, Ethnicity, And Legal Considerations...,” 155-6.

18 *Ibid.* 157.

19 *Ibid.* 159.

gender. These are Catholic women of Dalit origins from Tiruvallur District in Tamil Nadu. For centuries they had been *bleeding* as a group. A study conducted among them about their religio-cultural practices,²⁰ a few years ago, found that more than half of them could not read or write though some of them have gone to the primary school. A good number of them belong to households with no land, a monthly income of less than Rs.2000 and having debt ranging from few thousands to few lakhs of rupees. One fourth of the respondents of this study were victims of domestic violence.²¹ Studying the religious practices of these women, it is interesting to note that they have something in common with the bleeding woman of the Gospel.

For instance, Kamala turns to Jesus for every need of hers. She is very anaemic and falls sick very often. She cannot consult a doctor due to her economic constraints. Sharing her experiences she says:

Whenever I am not well I take some water in a container and then I pray over that water. 'Lord Jesus, change this water into your Blood. And when I drink this, let your blood heal every part of my body.' After my prayer I make the sign of the cross over the water and drink that water with deep faith. I have experienced healing many a times. When there is a pain or ache in any part of my body, I take some oil and pray over the oil in a similar way. Then I apply the oil to the affected part and the pain subsides.²²

Arbhudah Mary of Gandhipuram, Tiruvallur Dt., holds a similar view when she says, "I have experienced healing by praying over the water and drinking the blessed water. With faith I must do it." Talking

20 See Thresiamma Thomas, *Women and Rituals: A Critical Inquiry into the Religio-Cultural Practices of Catholic Women of Dalit Origins in Tiruvallur Dist., Tamil Nadu*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis submitted to the University of Madras, August 2007, p. 74.

21 See Thresiamma Thomas, *Women and Rituals: A Critical Inquiry into the Religio-Cultural Practices of Catholic Women of Dalit Origins in Tiruvallur Dist., Tamil Nadu*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis submitted to the University of Madras, August 2007, p. 74.

22 As quoted in Thresiamma Thomas. *Women and Rituals*. 122

about her experience of praying for other sick people she says, "Those who drink the water should have the same faith. If our faith and their faith is one, then they will be healed." She continued, "I pray with the Bible, I make the sign of the cross on my children when they go out." Narrating the experience of her daughter's first delivery she says:

When my daughter Dorothy conceived, I did not give her any medicine. Even though the doctor said that they would have to go for a caesarian operation, we managed the first delivery without the operation. I prayed the Rosary... Just used oil, gave her blessed water to drink. I have great faith in Mary's help and protection. In fact Dorothy's child is *Mathapillai* (Mary's child). I pray for others too. Whoever calls me I go and pray with them.²³

Another woman from Kadambattur shared a similar practice. She says:

When my son got typhoid, I took the Bible and read it. I asked my son to believe, to have faith and to reflect and see what mistakes he had made, ask pardon from God and then pray for healing. You have to believe in God and God's power to heal you.²⁴

Besides the above-mentioned ways, women use other means while praying for the sick. A number of women said that they use Rosary beads. They place the Rosary beads on the sick person and then pray. Some use flower petals taken from the Church. They collect flowers from garlands placed on Mary's statues and these are used in times of sickness. Some use ashes especially, the ash that is left over, after burning the incense stick commonly known as *matha sambrani*. They take the ash and make the sign of the cross with it on the person who is sick. Some use Holy Water from the Church.

When women were asked about how they pray when some one is sick in the family or when someone else calls them to pray for a sick

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, 123

person. 79.7 per cent of them said that they use spontaneous prayers. Besides the prayers, 28.3 per cent said that they read the Bible as part of the prayer. 31.7 per cent take water, say a prayer of blessing over it, and make the sick person drink that water. 42.7 per cent of the women said that they use blessed oil to heal the sick person. Some of them get the oil from various Shrines. 27 per cent say that they place the Bible on the person and pray for healing.

4. The Power of the Bleeding Woman

Having seen the story of the bleeding woman of Mark and the religious practices of Dalit women especially their ways of getting healed, we can see a number of similarities between the two. In their situation of marginalization and social ostracism, Dalit women can truly identify with the bleeding woman who is chronically ill and is at the mercy of a male medical profession. The economic destitution of the bleeding woman is very similar to that of the Dalit women mentioned above. Both the groups suffer economic disempowerment in a patriarchal or/and caste-ridden society. Sickness brings about an added powerlessness and helplessness among Dalit women since they have very little means to seek expert medical help.

The bleeding woman is a social outcast whether she is of gentile or Jewish origin. If gentile, she is considered as an outcast by the Jewish society and if Jewish her present sickness makes her an outcast in her own society. This bleeding woman stands in solidarity with the Dalit women who for centuries experience what it means to be kept outside the normal society and treated as untouchables even to the present day.

Yet, faced with sickness, the Dalit women do not despair. They have found ways of facing the sickness. Though powerless in the eyes of the world, they are capable of appropriating divine healing power from Jesus. Like the bleeding woman of the Gospel, they take initiatives to cure themselves and others. They have devised ways of appropriating supernatural powers. They use symbols that are easily available, symbols that do not cost them much in economic terms. Water, flowers, Rosary beads, Bible, ash, oil, etc. function as *sacraments* through which they obtain the healing power from God.

The bleeding woman of the Gospel extracted power from Jesus by a simple touch. Dalit women too extract divine power from the same Jesus by similar means of touch or taste.

What is most outstanding in both the cases is their deep faith. Although situated on the margins of the society, the Dalit women like the haemorrhaging woman, are shining examples of deep faith. Just as Jesus recognized and affirmed the faith of the bleeding woman of Galilee, He continues to affirm the faith of the Dalit women who are despised by the society. In that affirmation, he also recognizes their humanity, selfhood, and their capacity for self-determination.

Conclusion

Reading the story of the haemorrhaging woman today can be an empowering experience for other bleeding women of today especially the Dalit women. Her story can affirm, enhance and strengthen their faith in the power of Jesus. Moreover, keeping her memory alive in our midst helps the Church to appreciate the witness Dalit women continue to give to the entire Church of their deep faith in Jesus. Further, they help all others who come in contact with them to deepen their faith in Jesus.

The *power* of these *bleeding* women is not just the power of their bleeding wombs to create, sustain and nurture life. It is their ability to appropriate religious power, divine power that restores their health, self-confidence and their full humanity in spite of the many bleedings they are subjected to.

Vidyajyoti College of Theology,

Delhi -110054, India

E-mail: smulackal@gmail.com

Re-constructing Woman's Self-Understanding and her Destiny: An Indian Feminist Reading of the Bent Woman (Lk 13:10-17)

Evelyn Monteiro

Contrary to popular belief and misconception, there is no scriptural sanction in Hinduism for the oppression of women. Hindu philosophy treats men and women as essentially the ever-pure, ever-free, ever illumined *Atman*, the genderless Self. This *Atman* becomes conditioned as male and female when associated with the mind and body. However, one must also accept the fact that the powerful complex system of Indian patriarchy continues to subject women to multiple bends as prevalent in the nefarious caste system, gender biased religious laws and structures, cultural traditions, the political system and in the hierarchical institutionalized Church. The power games of Indian patriarchy have also intruded the domains of the life and structure of the Church in India. Gender insensitivity is common practice at all levels in the Church. Their exclusion and subjugation are partially based on the traditional association of women's status with sexuality, sin and reproduction, and on myths of labeling women as polluted, temptress, weak and inferior.

Evelyn Monteiro SCC is a member of the Faculty of Theology at Janana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune and teaches Systematic Theology. She is a visiting professor at various other faculties both in India and abroad. She is the vice-president of Indian Theological Association (ITA) and has published extensively on Ecclesiology and issues related to Women.

Introduction

The contemporary situation of women and their ever struggling journey to self determination can be comprehended only within the framework of our historical past. One has to be informed of the specific factors that negate women's status and well being in terms of work, wages, opportunities and resources available. In fact, there are many puzzles and contradictions in the perception of Indian women's identity and status. Our unique marriage-family system, our kinship structure, our established hierarchies of caste and class and our cultural and religious traditions have carved clearly defined boundaries in the life and world of Indian women. A critique of these clichés will reveal the harsh truth that the over-arching system of patriarchy that 'bends' the woman's dignity at all stages of her life is a major factor in degrading and devaluing her life.

The article aims to analyse and re-examine the situation of Indian women in the light of the story of the bent woman in Luke 13:10-17. While re-reading the passage from an Indian feminist perspective, we will be able to see that the Good News as preached by Jesus of Nazareth mounts a challenge to change long held traditional perceptions of Indian women, re-construct their self-understanding and liberate them from their bent status in the Indian society and Church.

1. The Bent Body of Indian Women

1.1. Polity of Domination-Dependency

The status of women in India has successively deteriorated from a state of considerable freedom and equality to that of dependence and subjugation. Indian scholars like J.B. Chaudhari, B.S. Upadhyay, J. J. Meyer, Shakuntala Rao Shastri and others used sources such as the Vedic texts, the Sutras, Smriti and epic texts and the Pali literature dealing with Buddhist legends and teachings to study the position of women in ancient and modern India and the Hindu religion. Most are of the opinion that there has been a gradual decline in the status of women through different periods of history. When reflecting on the waning position of the Indian woman, it becomes imperative to speak of the systemic causes of her subjugation within the socio-cultural,

economic and religio-political situations to which the Indian woman's 'bent' status is inextricably linked with.

It is true that a slow but significant change in women's position and women's consciousness is taking place in post modern India. The efforts of Indian women themselves in initiating and mobilizing change are noteworthy. However, one must also accept the fact that the powerful and complex system of Indian patriarchy continues to subject women to multiple bends as prevalent in the nefarious caste system, gender biased religious laws and structures, cultural traditions, the political system (the much hyped Women's Reservation Bill is still hanging fire in the Lok Sabha), and in the hierarchical institutionalized Church. Although discrimination, segregation and subjugation are frequently observed in many societies, the severity of gender-based oppression in India is without parallel. The experience of women-victims of this oppressive patriarchal system has to be reflected upon in any authentic theologizing in India.

Sylvia Walby, a feminist sociologist defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Patriarchy as it exists in India is a system that does not favour emancipating, empowering and enabling women. Such an ideology in theory and practice is deeply embedded in the Hindu/Indian philosophy as a matter of religious doctrine. The polity of domination-dependency, the catch phrase of patriarchy is prevalent in various ways. All throughout her life, the woman lives in subjugation as it exists in the master-slave relationship, "In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, in widowhood to her sons" (*Manusmriti* 5:148, 9:3). The power game of patriarchy is more than evident in this structure: Restrict a woman's place, thwart her dreams and control her independence to ensure her subordination in every sphere of human life.

1.2. Myth of Economic Ethics

The domination-dependency pattern as it exists in the class system of landlords and landless bonded labourers is another form of patriarchal control. In such a system, male-female economic discrimination is particularly evident in the practice of unequal job opportunities and wages and unjust property rights.

With regard to property rights, men can acquire wealth through seven ways: inheritance, profit, purchase, conquering, investing, working and gifts (*Manusmriti* 10:115) whereas a woman's wealth is traditionally restricted to what is given to her in front of the marriage fire, at the bridal procession, or as a token of affection, and what she received from her father, mother or brother as dowry (*Manusmriti* 9:194).² In addition, she should not accumulate wealth without her husband's permission (9:199) and any gift and whatever her husband might give her should become the property of her children when she dies, (even) during her husband's lifetime (9:195).

In agriculture, industry, construction and other work sites women are paid less than men and often for the same type of work. Technology and the machine age have further deprived women of jobs in domains that were primarily theirs. The well-known Amul Dairy project in Anand, Gujarat has men on most of the better paying jobs and on the decision making bodies in the cooperatives. While the care of animals and other backbreaking tasks are restricted to women.

In the urban set up the economic scenario is changing. Women are not only homemakers but also substantially and even equally contribute as wage earners. However, a rapidly growing culture of professionally educated and working women with independent bank savings is creating dents in husband-wife relationships and family life for it goes against the ethos of the traditional Indian home as determined by *Manusmriti*. Furthermore, within the global capitalist order, Indian women of every class stratum fall prey to the consumer culture that "promotes not only a Western brand of consumption and lifestyle, but also projects an image of women which is discriminatory, oppressive and male-oriented."³ Today's consumer market makes of women, victims of commercial exploitation and shapes an image of woman in terms of her face and body.

1.3. Religious and Cultural Conditioning

Religious and cultural symbols and myths have also had a place in devaluing the dignity of women. Contrary to popular belief and misconception, there is no scriptural sanction in Hinduism for the oppression of women. Hindu philosophy treats men and women as

essentially the ever-pure, ever-free, ever illumined *Atman*, the genderless Self. This *Atman* becomes conditioned as male and female when associated with the mind and body. The Vedanta teaches us that divinity is innate in every human being. It promotes the 'Self' that is present in every person, whether male or female. In fact, Swami Vivekananda often appealed to the people to respect the rights of women saying that they were living images of the supreme power, *Shakti*. The *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad (1.4.3) even assigns equal status to men and women "The Divine person parted one's very body into two; from that came husband and wife. Therefore this body of husband or wife is one half of oneself, like one of the two halves of a split pea."

A gradual stereotyping of women as impure, untouchable, evil and of lower birth emerged only in the later edited tradition of Hindu Scriptures. The laws of purity in the Book of Manu (3:239, 4:40) and *Vyasa Samhita* (2:37-40) and the *Atr-smriti* (5:49-66) sanction the belief that a menstruating woman is like 'chandala' (despised caste). Religious sanctions coupled with gender biased socio-cultural constructs denied women their rightful place and space, subjecting them to multiple discriminations: as woman (biological status), as female (socio-cultural stereotyping), as daughter/wife/mother/widow (family/marital status), as Indian (caste system), as Hindu/Muslim/Christian (religious structure).

This system of multiple discriminations victimizes the Indian woman at all stages of her life. An ancient Indian adage that reads "the wife is a friend, the daughter a misery, the son is for the father light in the highest heaven" explains the place of the daughter in the family. A daughter is a misfortune for the family and a son-less mother can be cast off according to the Hindu law books. The woman's biological status determines the primary purpose of her life, she "was created only for procreation" (*prajana*, *Manusmriti* (9:96)). The Hindu literature glorifies motherhood, rather mother of sons. This "apotheosis of the mother," Mies explains "is the direct consequence of the requirements of a patriarchal social system" since the male offspring was the primary concern of married life.⁴ Her reproductive system reduces her to a mere medium for the production of sons. Her womb becomes an

active but non-recognized means of wealth production and continuity of family heritage.

Furthermore, as wife, her primary duty is to please and serve her husband with absolute obedience. Such a wife becomes a *pativrata*, one who worships her lord, and is considered a paragon of womanhood in Hinduism. In fact, at marriage, the Hindu woman gains the stability and status of wife with the blessing, "Be like Sita, Savitri, Parvati." The female triune is a cliché to emphasize the role of ideal wives. Furthermore, absolute monogamy for women is manifest in the prohibition of widow marriage. The widow is stigmatized as impure or a bad omen and is excluded from ancestor and temple worship, marriage and family rituals, and from succession and inheritance.⁵

In sum, the Indian social history confirms the hypothesis that the stereotyped woman's role of daughter-wife-mother-widow is the creation of the Brahmanic law-givers. This was to perpetuate the polity of male dominance-female dependency in order to ensure the continuity of socio-economic and political benefits of the upper castes.

1.4. Woman's Body: Site of Violence

Women are trapped in the mesh of domination-dependency through violence. Brutal acts of sexual assault, harassment and rape, bride burning and dowry deaths, female foeticide and infanticide seem to be the order of the day. Dalit women, for instance are victims of the Devadasi system by which women are forced into prostitution for the pleasure of the powerful. Quite often when Dalits breach tradition by entering spaces like the temple or wells reserved for the upper castes, the Dalit women become easy targets of vengeance. The media projection of women as sex commodities also add on to the growing culture of violence against women. Women are an endangered species and become silenced victims of varied forms of violence that inflict destruction of their body and death to their personhood. Violence against women has a socio-cultural, psychological base. Madhu Bhushan writes:

A complex interplay of the forces of an unequal socio-economic system and the institution of patriarchy generate an ideology and value system which seek to propagate itself through an invidious process of

socialization and structural forms of violence in institutions such as the law, media and family, which reinforce social and economic relations and roles. Personal violence against women, like rape and dowry deaths, therefore only reflects the systematic violence of our society that creates conditions which are in themselves destructive.⁶

In the light of what we have discussed, it is evident that patriarchy engineers the life of Indian women and shapes their destiny to one of a nameless and faceless piece of property to be used and passed on from one owner to another. The oppressive polity of domination-dependency 'bends' the Indian woman in stages and gradually denies her of her dignity, individuality and identity. Since the work of the famed anthropologist, Margaret Mead, we are aware that the well carved out male and female roles are an ethnocentric illusion; and that the dominant culture defines gender roles. Therefore, what is questionable is the logic of extending role-expectations of women that have been determined by a particular elite class and caste to women of all strata of society and of all regions of the Indian sub-continent.

1.5 Women in the Indian Church

While Christianity, the dharma of Jesus can be acclaimed for alleviating the position of women, the church can boast little of its treatment of women. The power games of Indian patriarchy have also intruded the domains of the life and structure of the Church in India. The Hindu perception of the place of women in religion and society as well as its conception of purity and pollution are in subtle ways present in the Church. Several gender-biased beliefs, discriminatory practices and customs followed at different stages in an Indian girl's life continue in Christian homes. Thus an Indian Christian woman is further bent with oppressive demands made on her as an Indian and Christian.

Today we may not have overt laws and taboos that confine women to a bent status within the church, but we have their equivalents. Women are marginalized and considered inappropriate for certain places and pursuits in the Church. Women may be given token representation in the Church as members of various consultative bodies. But they are still excluded from decision-making and are given a

peripheral place in the church's system of governance. Gender insensitivity is common practice at all levels in the Church. Their exclusion and subjugation are partially based on the traditional association of women's status with sexuality, sin and reproduction, and on myths of labeling women as polluted, temptress, weak and inferior.

The Church has to recognize how the established patriarchal and hierarchal structures and practices reinforce unjust gender relationships and perpetuate subtle forms of violence against women in the Church. To remain silent or to silence victims is complicity to the sin of violence against women. Jesus himself said, "I tell you, if you keep silent, the stones will cry out!" (Lk 19:40).

2. An Indian Feminist Re-reading of Lk 13:10-17⁷

An Indian woman's experience is varied and complex. It includes the biological experience of being woman, the socio-cultural experience of being female and the economic experience of being a poor or consumer woman. In every sphere it is an experience of victimization. Women are bent and disfigured. Who are responsible for the wounds inflicted on them? The powerful words of Jesus "You hypocrites" when he addressed and challenged the Scribes and Pharisees for their unjust and inhuman practices ring loud and clear today.

What is the Christian perception of body-ness, with particular attention to woman as image of God. The warrant for acknowledging the importance of woman's body is derived from the concrete praxis of Jesus in his healing ministry. Through his healing ministry Jesus affirms that the salvation that comes to us from God brings wholeness to bodies that are crippled, ravaged by disease or evil spirits, polluted by religious laws and marginalized by social systems.⁸ The story of the woman bent over makes this point. A hermeneutic reading of Lk 13:10-17 from an Indian perspective will enable us to re-construct the woman's sense of self and body as Gospel proclamation.

A hermeneutical method which a reader or interpreter always employs in approaching a text is with a number of searching questions from one's existential experience. To interpret means to make the text understandable and this in turn presupposes an understanding.⁹ There

cannot be any such thing as pre-suppositionless analysis of a text. Moreover, the woman is the interpretive centre of feminist hermeneutics for she can "deconstruct the dominant paradigms of biblical interpretation and reconstruct them in terms of a critical rhetoric that understands biblical texts and traditions as a living and changing heritage, one which does not legitimate patriarchal oppression but can foster emancipatory practices of faith-communities."¹⁰

Women's experience of marginalization and oppression as well as their struggles for legitimate freedom in all spheres of life are central to Indian feminist consciousness and hermeneutics. Rooted in the sufferings, struggles, resilience and hopes of the invisible and silenced women in all strata of the Indian society, the hermeneutical method of re-reading the episode is an attempt to question and challenge the Indian patriarchal society. The episode, at first glance seems to be an interesting narration of the story of the bent woman. Most of the exegetes have tagged it as a healing incident or a Sabbath controversy thus limiting its meaning to a mere Sabbath healing episode. A close reading of the text also reveals a liberative significance for the women-theophilus of today. The passage poses a few questions for consideration:

- What is the significance of the inclusion of the controversy in vv15 and 16 and of the summary verse 17 in the story?
- What message does it have for the 'Theophilus' of today?

2.1. *Metanoia: A Sign Value of the God's Reign*

The inclusion of the episode of the bent woman which is special only to Luke seems to have a purpose when viewed within the immediate context of Lk 12:49-13:35. This teaching section in the Lucan travel narrative affirms that repentance is a necessary condition for the coming of God's reign. The unit of vv 1-9 is a renewed call to repentance addressed to the people (Pharisees) in 12:54-59. Well aware that these Jewish leaders had a distorted conception of the Kingdom, Jesus exhorts them to change their mindset and lay aside resistance to 'the plan of God' which they had manifested both towards John the Baptist (7:30) and Jesus himself (11:53-54). Illustrating the parables of the fig tree (13:6-9), the mustard seed and leaven (13:18-21), Jesus underlines the importance of *kairos*, inviting the Jewish

leaders and the crowd to recognize the present time as an opportune time for metanoia and hope for salvation.¹¹

Judaism with its Patriarchal overtones narrows the way to salvation especially to those who are blinded by their own religious accomplishments (18:9-12) and who refuse to see the urgency of liberating a stricken neighbour (14:1-6). The episode of the bent woman which is placed within the literary framework of the call to repentance in 12:49-13:35, underscores the need for a change of heart of those who are enslaved to oppressive laws and systems.

2.2. *Sabbath and Synagogue:*

Symbols of Jewish Male Hegemony

The Sabbath healings provoke a controversy over the legitimacy of Jesus' action. His opponents view them as a breach of the Sabbath law. In the story of the bent woman Jesus explains his action bringing out the significance of God's decisive act. The woman's sickness is described as "having a spirit of infirmity" (13:11) and "whom Satan bound for 18 years" (v 16).

Jesus' works of healing are a means of overpowering Satan and re-establishing God's reign of wholeness and fullness of life to those who are bound (4:18). In the light of the Jewish worldview, we shall proceed to explore the hermeneutical understanding of the episode for the women in India.

We shall not enter into the details of the Sabbath healing narrative but rather the consequences of it because they are pertinent for the women in the Indian context. A heated debate about Sabbath laws followed the healing of the woman in the Synagogue. Sabbath and synagogue are important symbols of Jewish male hegemony. The synagogue *ochlos* includes men and women but the latter were segregated with special chambers provided for them. Supremacy of the Law and sanctity of the Sabbath day were upheld at the expense of human needs and life. A similar practice is prevalent in India. The *Manusmriti* and other Holy Scriptures and the temple function as symbols of patriarchal control. Religious laws and social taboos that are sanctioned by religion deprive the Indian woman of her identity and individuality. "A woman is not fit for independence Men must make their women dependent day and night" (*Manusmriti* 9:2-3).

Jesus regarded any form of discrimination as a human barrier to equality. Crossing discriminatory boundaries of the Jewish-Greco-Roman traditions, Jesus adopts a more just, humane and liberal attitude towards women (Lk 7:36f; 8:42-48.). He restores their bent status, aptly expressed as "and she was made straight" (13:13) for the prime purpose of including them in God's reign and his mission.¹²

The episode is significant because by freeing the woman from her bondage, Jesus manifests the life-giving liberating power of God that moves the woman from margin to center, from invisibility to visibility, from being nameless to being called a daughter of Abraham/Sarah (cf. Lk 8:48). The woman bent over now looks up and is empowered (cf. Heb 12:12, Acts 15:16) to proclaim the liberating power of God that she has experienced.¹³ It also creates a conflict between the prevailing patriarchal cultic and social customs and Jesus' breakthrough of them and between the blindness of the Jewish opponents and Jesus' openness and mercy.

The episode is also special because it presents for the first time a ruler of the synagogue as an opponent of Jesus. The ruler opposes the cure as a breach of the Sabbath laws (v 14 cf. Dt 5:13). The indignant rebuke was directed towards Jesus whose initiative to heal the bent woman was a violation of the Jewish religious laws and social custom. The Jewish opponents are so wrapped up in externals that they fail to recognize the Kingdom of God present in their midst.

2.3. The Controversy: Refusal to save life is to destroy it

In his controversial response, Jesus appears to be the authority over the law. He who had declared that the disciples were worth more than sparrows (12:6-7) now pronounces that a woman is worth more than an ox or an ass (v 15). Jesus' apparent violation of accepted traditions can be explained thus: Any refusal to do good is to do evil. In the context of his mission all life is subject to death and therefore under demand for decision (cf. 13:3, 9:23f, 59). To refuse to 'save life' is 'to destroy it.' Jesus' liberative action in the case of the bent woman is an interpretation and continuation of his mission of the Kingdom. It is redemptive and salvific, a matter of freedom or enslavement. Therefore, he takes the liberty of exercising his authority in placing mission before ritual.

In his response, Jesus does not address the ruler of the synagogue directly. It is addressed to the 'hypocrites' which includes both the 'rulers' and those in the crowd (cf. 12:1-13:21). In 12:1-3, Jesus warns his disciples against the yeast of hypocrisy and in 11: 39-44 and 12:1-13:9, He exposes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the disciples who do not recognize the signs of the Kingdom because of their bondage to false legalism. In 13:15 Luke narrates a concrete manifestation of the walls of division created by the hypocrisy of official religion. This is evident in their refusal to accommodate the Sabbath rules to the urgency of freeing the bent woman.

Jesus criticizes the legalism and hypocrisy of the Pharisees, which today would be extended to leaders of different religions who make laws to safeguard their own interests and are blind to human need and suffering. The movement of logic involved is *a minori ad majus*. If the law is applicable to animals, it is even more in the case of human beings. Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater in a series of parallels that is characteristic of the Lucan literary style.

- If an animal, how much more the daughter of Abraham? daughter of Arbaaz Khan in Gujarat, wife of Sharma in Delhi, mother of Arockiadoss in Tamilnadu?

- If one whom you have bound for a few hours, how much more one whom human made satanic laws have bound for 18 years? And how much more a raped girl, a sonless mother and a young widow who are bound for life by socio-cultural taboos and religious laws?

- If you can loose the bonds of an animal on the Sabbath as well as on the other six days of the week, how much more is it necessary for God to loose this woman's bond on the Sabbath?

Thus, the question does not concern breaking the Sabbath law but applying the law of human concern to suffering humanity. If it is permitted to untie an ox or ass on the Sabbath and lead it out to drink, then much more to liberate a daughter of Abraham/Sarah who was bound for 18 years. The issue at stake is not Jesus' attitude or interpretation of the Sabbath law. The central issue is the hardness of heart of Jesus' opponents who permit 'sacred' rituals to segregate this needy woman from divine help and their blindness to recognize the presence of the Kingdom in their midst. Similarly, with regard to the

situation of Indian women who are bound by laws, taboos and superstitious beliefs at every stage of their life, the issue in question is not the oral or written tradition handed down from one generation to another. It is rather the blindness of contemporary lawmakers – the Indian family, political rulers, religious leaders – who refuse to see women as human beings created in God's image and who have a right to live as free persons.

2.4. The Divided Response:

Shamed adversaries and rejoicing crowd

Jesus makes a further attempt to bring about a change of heart among his adamant opponents. He addresses the woman as 'daughter of Abraham/Sarah' (v 16) to remind them that as an Israelite she has a claim to the special covenant blessing promised to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 17:7; 22:17; Mic 7:20). Significant among those promised of God's blessing is John the Baptist's preaching in 3:3-8 where Luke shows that reference to Abraham does not imply that physical descent makes one a natural heir to the promises of salvation. But one who repents, whether Jew or Gentile will be saved (3:8). In freeing the bent woman Jesus fulfils his commission of releasing captives from the bonds of evil (4:18).

While the laws of patriarchal Judaism blind Jesus' opponents to recognize the importance of liberating the woman and their narrow legalistic outlook prevents them from seeing the presence of the Kingdom in his works, *pas ho ochlos* (the crowds cf. 3:21, 7:29, 19:37) rejoice at all the glorious things done by Jesus (13:17b). This divided response (v 17) to the word and action of Jesus on the occasion of liberating the bent woman builds on what preceded and prepares for what follows. The shamed adversaries and the rejoicing crowd have their counterparts in the prophecy of Simeon that many will fall and rise when confronted by the sign of contradiction (2:34); beginning with those who accepted and those who rejected the baptism of John (7:29-30), right through Jesus' programmatic manifesto at Nazareth (4:22,28), his public ministry (5:26, 7:29-30), on the cross (23:35-36, 47f) and in the post resurrection times (Acts 2:12-13).

One can expect a similar divided response to the contemporary efforts being made by women activists and NGO's to free bent Indian women from a life-space that is restricted to the home, well, market place and temple. The woman's body cycle adds further temporal and spatial restrictions to her already small world. A sense of shame and powerlessness renders the woman voiceless, nameless and faceless. Any attempt to break these shackles is bound to evoke a divided response of opposition and rejoicing. It is, indeed a herculean task to break down the range of mountains heaped with centuries-old debris of myths, superstitious beliefs, customs and traditions.

Such divided response of opposition and openness to change brings to fulfillment what Jesus had told his disciples in 12:51 "I have come to bring division and not peace." One witnesses such divisions and conflicts in modern Indian families, particularly in cosmopolitan cities where girl children aspire to be educated and pursue professional careers, where young girls who are economically stable refuse to become victims of the traditional marriage market, where married women seek job opportunities outside their homes and where wives expect their husbands to share in household chores. These may be small beginnings, a mere drop in the ocean of widespread patriarchy in the rest of India, but they are hopeful signs of constructive changes taking place. Any effort to free women from the shackles of tradition is bound to create division and disturbance in a male-dominated society. But such divisions and turbulence are signs that the reign of God is at hand and that the subjugated and marginalized are also rightful beneficiaries of fullness of life.

Conclusion

The Lucan narrative about Jesus' bringing wholeness to the bent woman reveals the nature of the salvific mission of Jesus. His initiative to restore wholeness to the bent woman expresses God's special concern for the anawim – all those who are 'bent' (anah), diminished and deprived of the means to live a full human life. His bold confrontation of those holding power and addressing them as "you hypocrites" continues to haunt the political, social and religious 'rulers' of today. A few 'repent' but the majority are oblivious to the growing

and grave evil of gender injustice and violence subtly invading the Indian society in new and different ways.

The episode has a special meaning to women in India. Like the bent woman ostracized for 18 years, the Indian women are bent for life by the various patriarchal systems operative in India. They are the unheard of and unseen citizens of the country. Their fate is even worse than other outcasts, for their female body and sexuality bend them double under the burden of being a woman and an Indian with all its social, cultural and religious implications. The only way to free our bent sisters who experience the painful reality of their dehumanization is a radical conversion of our mindset and attitudes and a turning away from our blindness to ordering our lives in working for the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Significant institutional changes have altered women's position and destiny. The efforts of women themselves in mobilizing change are underway. We need to keep alive the memory of those outstanding women who brought women's causes to the forefront. We remember our foremothers and forefathers like Pandita Ramabahi, D.K. Karve, Periyar, Jyotibha Phule and others who have dreamed visions to re-image women in India and re-construct their destinies. Following the footprints of our pioneers, we continue to build on what our forerunners have done and advance God's reign of justice and equality.

Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth

Ramwadi, Pune-411014,

E-mail: srevelynm@gmail.com

Women Theologizing: Beginnings of Feminist Theologies and their Concerns

Pearl Drego

Theological reflections and articulations by women, are often referred to as feminist theologies, though some women theologians are not happy with that term. Indian feminist theologies emerge as women insert themselves within local communities, reflecting together on their experiences, expressing their biblical faith through Christ-centered actions and using official Church documents to inspire redemptive attitudes in the midst of social, cultural, political, and ecological turmoil. Indian feminist theologies today continue to share a lot in common with contextual theologies from a subaltern perspective. Many have emerged through conferences, consultations, workshops and women's study groups, maintaining a close connection to inter-religious and ecological theologies. Feminist theologies were not worked out "in theory", or in academic locations, though they have academic standing today and utilize the best resources of scholarship.

Ms Pearl Drego is the Founder-Director of TACET Academy of Social Transformation & Mental Health, New Delhi, a distress centre for people in need. She is a certified psychotherapist and family counsellor with an MA in Philosophy and PhD in Sociology. She facilitates housing projects for poor women, programmes for disadvantaged children, dysfunctional families and teacher-counsellors.

Introduction

The rise of feminist theology did not come as an attempt to grab power and status in the Church, nor as a self-assertive claim for identity.

though these issues gain importance along the way. Women began theologizing out of the sheer anguish of their situations, out of the countless rejections and exclusions they were subjected to, and out of their growing confidence as worthy and acceptable creatures before God. Their claim to think through the issues of salvation and redemption was part of their commitment to their own integrity and moral capacity, and to the hope that the emerging sense of woman's humanity which was bursting upon them would nourish a new eco-friendly Christian spirituality.

Origins of Feminist Theologies

Women's theologizing was born on the tide of women's consciousness-raising within secular women's movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as a result, it was integrated with the movements against slavery and colonialism, against militarization, inhuman capitalism, fascism and hegemonic power games. In order to give such theologising an identity, it gradually came to be called "feminist theology". There is no monolithic "feminist theology" but rather a wide spectrum, ranging from what has been called goddess spirituality to mainstream theology which reframes traditional Catholic theology from women's perspectives.

The right to self-determination and democratic process which spread among emerging nations in the first decade of the twentieth century gave further impetus to women's self-understanding and courage to overcome patriarchy in Church and society. Indigenous peoples, language groupings and ethnic communities were discovering the moral validity of their rights and spaces, the uniqueness of their own cultures and histories. They raised slogans of partnership, people's power, participative democracy and human rights, that resounded with vigour in feminist consciousness and gave women the banner under which to launch a struggle against physical, social, economic, cultural, political, emotional and other forms of abuse and oppression. The role of religion in human socialization and suffering began to be understood as secular perceptions critiqued sacrosanct presumptions of the past. Gradually, the analysis of all forms of discrimination caused or supported by religious institutions including the Church, helped the women's efforts to reach deeper levels of personal and social transformation. Women theologising

have therefore been change agents in the Churches and in the larger society.

The first feminist theologians were women from various evangelical Protestant Churches in the United States who while participating in the anti-slavery movement and later in the movement for equal rights, began to see how they had been domesticated in the Church and prevented from contributing as equal partners in Church affairs and from training in theology and scripture. The moral reform societies of 1830s in the United States turned into women's emancipation campaigns as women became part of once all-male organizations and went on to administrative and teaching roles in them. Equality before the law, voting rights and just wages became citizen values and women's values. As black women intensified their struggle for human rights, white women grew further in their analyses of their subordinate status within the Churches. By the mid-nineteenth century, Protestant women had trained in theology, achieved the status of full-fledged women missionaries and had access to important missionary roles. A host of women from all the Churches made a diligent study of scripture and Church history and soon began a courageous critique of spiritual texts, exposing the male bias in the beliefs and practices of traditional religion. They were determined to uncover the sacralised stereotypes and ideology that had kept them subjugated their Churches, their homes and their societies. These critiques ultimately led to a variety of feminist theologies in the first world. In Europe, the issues of ordination raised a furore in Protestant circles in the middle of the twentieth century, leading to serious splits between different theological groups within the same country.

A landmark event in the history of women realigning their position within Christianity, is that of the Seneca Falls, New York first Women's Rights Convention called by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1848. Having been refused entry into a London conference on the abolition of slavery, because she was a woman, Elizabeth was determined to start a new movement based on the firm belief that man and woman are created equal by God. Her publishing of *The Woman's Bible* in 1898 was a clarion call for women to have their own viewpoints (and humour !) on scriptural issues. This was followed in 1923 by Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's book, *His Religion and Hers*. From then on there was no turning back.

The second wave of feminism started in the 1960s and in this phase the secular struggles were more integrated with the religious critiques. Biblical studies by both men and women focused on the perception of male and female in the Bible, on the understanding of leadership in the early Church, on the support for human rights and dignity within the New Testament framework, etc. Jewish women joined with Christian women in the analysis of how the Old Testament had been used against the dignity and capacity of women in past decades. A review of Paul's injunctions to women was made by Church leaders and scholars in general. Christian women gradually began contributing to mainstream theology. Some argued for "women's space" to claim their identity, some stayed within the Christian arena of discourse with their vision of new ecclesial communities. It was from these concerns that women's theologizing emerged and moved further to take on many wider issues concerning the nature of woman, her worthiness as created by God, her destiny as redeemed by Jesus and her calling to full leadership in the Church, her voting rights as a citizen and her capacity for political leadership and ordination. The first meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1948 intensified the discussions that finally led many Churches to vote positively on the matter of women's ordination. The Presbyterian Church allowed ordination in 1953 and others gradually followed suit. In Europe it was the Swedish Church, mainly Lutheran, that got most attention when it voted to ordain women in 1958. By the middle of the 1970s about sixty churches around the world had voted for ordination of women. The first woman to be ordained in India was Rev. Elizabeth Paul, in 1987. Therefore, in many of the Protestant Churches, women's participation in Church administration and especially women's ordination were the epicenters of exegesis and hermeneutics on women's position in the Old and New Testaments.

Feminist theology, in spite of its beginnings in white western women's experience, has had a significant impact on Christian women and women of other faiths, all over the world. For Asian women, ordination was not a priority issue. Many were influenced by those Christian women who had the opportunity to study in Protestant theological faculties in

Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States, and who saw Asian poverty and Asian religion as their first priorities. The World Council of Churches did a lot to spread feminist thought and ritual around the world, especially to countries now known as the global south. The "faith of our fathers" was soon seen equally as the "faith of our mothers". Today we speak of three waves of Christian feminist theologizing. In the third wave, women of colour have chosen to call their kind of feminist theologizing "womanist theology", (a term coined by the black novelist Alice Walker), and women of all colours have referred to their fellowship in conferences and liturgies as "woman-Church".

Women 'Doing Theology' in India

At the time when liberation theologies from Latin America were being imported and contextualized in different countries around the world, contextualized feminist theologies were taking shape in Asia, as they used similar methods. Their starting-point was the dialogue between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith present within a socio-cultural milieu. The dialogue between daily life experiences and the faith of the community helped to create the imagery and axis of theologizing. Feminist theology in India asserted itself in the 1970s in a way that women and their lives became the symbols, signs, and events of God-experience. The paschal mystery was now located in their personal journeys of courage and hope, in the tragedies and fulfillments of their daily life. These experiences became part of the liturgical life of their faith-community so that socio-economic justice and gender justice were now integrated with the saving action of God in Christ, not just in their minds but also in their hearts. For Catholic feminist theologians in India, the larger issues of injustice against women have taken precedence over issues of women's ordination and Church leadership. Their concerns include problems such as female foeticide, honour killings, denial of equal wages, sexual harassment, domestic violence, unequal inheritance laws, child labour, repression of the girl child, women trafficking, etc. They are also concerned with understanding women's dignity in holy scripture, in challenging gender stereotypes in Church and society, reinterpreting sexuality, creating new forms of ecclesia and bringing wholeness into Christian spiritualities.

Women's participation in India's freedom struggle and the spread of education for girls in the nineteenth century prepared a generation of educated, vocal and internationally acclaimed Indian Christian women. When Sarojini Naidu became President of the Indian National Congress in December 1925, Indian women's capabilities and leadership became part of the ethos of our emerging political entities. The All India Women's conference of 1926 which brought 2000 participants together in Pune University organised women power, and later entered the political realm. Public role models emerged in the vibrant personalities of women such as Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Swarnakumar Debi and her daughter Sarla Devi, Madame Bhikaiji Rustomji Cama, Kumudini Mitra, Begun Hamid Ali, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Pandita Ramabai, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Kasturba Gandhi and others. Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, not only eulogized women but also supported the reform movements that aimed to free women from age-old cultural, political and religious oppressions. The feminist movement in Indian civil society, grew with the campaigns against rape, dowry and sati, claiming women's statutory rights, and developing a common feminist terminology and culture.

Indian women were already exposed to women's freedom through Bollywood movies, through women's participation in the freedom movement, through increased higher education for women and through women writers in English and in many Indian languages. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, the formation of women's action groups in the 1960s and 1970s, the report of the Committee on the Status of Women 1974, the Mathura rape case of 1980 and the campaigns that decade against dowry deaths and sati, against female foeticide, reproductive rights of women, the Maternity Benefits Act of 1988, the setting up of the National Commission for Women in 1990, work for the Domestic Violence Act 2005 and the other Acts protecting women, united Indian women across different religions and social ideologies.

Feminist theologizing in India was therefore rooted in the struggle of the Indian Churches to incarnate within the Indian context and within the struggle of the poor, the disadvantaged and the oppressed in civil society. Through the Spirit-centered theology of post Vatican II, Catholic women were conscientized into a faith-experience imbued with a sincere love for the Jesus of salvation and a strong sense of being

Indian. Deconstructing colonial images in the Church is part of their agenda as the domination of European art in the Catholic Church in India promotes the domination of white patriarchy of the global north, and downgrades the dignity and identity of Indian women imposing white patriarchal culture on women's culture. The history of women's salvation and their political history are intertwined psychodynamically; and self-reflectively, theologizing emerged from women sacramentalising the death and resurrection of Jesus in their bodies and in their relationships, their public lives, careers, ministries and mystical experiences.

Indian Christian theologians who are committed to feminist theology strongly feel that they must accompany the journey of all Indian women, not just of Christian women. Doing feminist research, understanding women's problems, promoting women's rights and opportunities, are all important for them. Feminist sociology and anthropology, feminist literature and liturgies, feminist art and architecture, feminist counseling and therapy, are the source material of feminist theologies. The struggle of Indian women for identity, dignity, respect, partnership, freedom of opportunity, redressal of grievances, and preservation of basic human rights are concrete aspects of a practical feminist theology. Women's lives are the 'text' for interpretation and elucidation, compassion or celebration. The actions of protecting women's rights, women's participation and prosperity in agriculture and land reform, in entrepreneurship and in the arts, in health and reproductive rights, in the lives of the unborn and the girl child, in problems of the family and community, in politics, media, local governance and in economic decisions, are all necessary projects for feminist theologizing.

Church Documents and Women

Women theologizing have to take into consideration the positive statements in Church documents as well as the lacunae in them. On the whole there is support for the emerging rights and aspirations of women in the world and Church. The oft-quoted statements of Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*, set the stage in the 1960s for a new respect for women in the Church and an acknowledgment of their past and current oppression. He underlined each human person's "right to life" and "safeguarding the inviolable rights of the human person", and how the common good should ensure "the effective protection of

the essential personal rights of each and every individual.” In the section on “Characteristics of the present day” he says, “Secondly, it is obvious to everyone that women are now taking a part in public life. This is happening more rapidly perhaps in nations of Christian civilization, and more slowly but broadly, among peoples who have inherited other traditions or cultures. Since women are becoming even more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life” No. 41.

The Council document *Gaudium et Spes* mentioned, “new social relationships between the sexes” GS 8. In the next article the document sets women’s call for equality and rights within the larger value of opportunities and benefits for all who have been denied them so far: “.....The hungry nations cry out to their affluent neighbours: women claim parity with men, in fact as well as of rights where they have not already obtained it; farmers and workers insist not just on the necessities of life but also on the opportunity to develop by their labour their personal talents and to play their due role in organizing economic, social, political, and cultural life. Now for the first time in history people are not afraid to think that cultural benefits are for all and should be available to everybody” GS 9. GS 29 condemning all forms of discrimination, mentions discrimination on the basis of sex and even refers to Galatians 3:28 to emphasize equality in Christ of all human beings.

The same document mentions women as leaders when it states that, “In each nation and social group there is a growing number of men and women who are conscious that they themselves are the craftsmen and moulders of their communities culture” GS 55, and that “it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men.”

Even though the Council seemed to accept uncritically the Church held belief that women have a particular nature, it promoted the public participation of women: “At present women are involved in nearly all spheres of life: they ought to be permitted to play their part fully according to their own particular nature. It is up to everyone to see to

it that woman's specific and necessary participation in cultural life be acknowledged and fostered" GS 60.

The Council document *Apostolicam actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People is more explicit about women's role in the whole life of society. It states, "Since in our days women are taking an increasingly active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that their participation in the various sectors of the Church's apostolate should likewise develop." AA 9. This slogan is affirmed again in document of the Synod of Bishops of 1971, *Justitia in Mundo*: "Anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes ... We urge that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in community life of Society and likewise of the Church."

Implications of Vatican II for Women's Freedom and Dignity

While contextual theology was openly and directly affirmed in the documents of Vatican II, as I have shown elsewhere, feminist theology finds support in these documents more by implication than by open mandate. In November 1990, at a seminar in Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, I gave ten points with texts from Vatican II documents to indicate the support given for women's freedom.¹ The points are:

1. Woman is recognized as a full human being having rights by the Council's stand on the essential equality of all human persons.
2. The quality of woman's personhood is retrieved by the Council's vision of the sacred and the secular.
3. Woman is freed from subordination by the Council's recognition of the divine call to holiness in baptism, given to each one without discrimination.
4. Discrimination against women, sexism, is recognized as a sin by the Council's stand on justice and human rights.
5. Woman's equality, holiness and ministry are reinforced by the concept of the People of God.

1 Pearl Drego, "Quest for an Indian Church – An Exploration of the Possibilities opened up by Vatican II", in Kurien Kunnumpuram and Lorenzo Fernando (eds.), *The Place and Role of Women in Church and Society*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand: 1993, pp. 159-212.

6. Women are freed to have their own hermeneutic by the Council's respect for the human sciences and development of many epistemologies and theologies.

7. Women are freed from male stereotypes of community and authority by the new democratic theology of the People of God.

8. "Women's culture" is made legitimate through the Council's theology of inculturation, indigenization, and reverence for secular values.

9. Women are freed from having to suffer pain as a result of the Council's eschatology including its emphasis on the resurrection of body and soul.

10. Women's new vocabulary of self-assertion and gender inclusive language is given authority through the Council's encouragement for the use of the vernacular and respect for relevant and meaningful language.

In spite of the support for women's inclusion in the Church given by the Council, on the whole, the language of Vatican II is patriarchal. Women are invisible in most of the documents. Though gender inclusive language was in existence in United Nations documents in the 1960s, with 'chairperson' replacing 'chairman', this language was not yet in vogue in Church circles. For example, *Nostra Aetate* 4 images Christ sent as "a man among men" NA 4. No. 5 of the same document speaks of the holy people of God as being "faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread ..." NA 10, the section on "The Dignity of the Human Person" and GS 29, is so ridden with male language in the English translations that they seem to exclude women or leave them invisible.

In 1981, Pope John Paul II expressed the need "to underline the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men." He said that, "In creating the human race 'male and female' God gave man and woman an equal personal dignity, endowing them with the inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person, God then manifested the dignity of women in the highest form possible, by assuming human flesh from the Virgin Mary" *Familiaris Consortio*, 22. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988, he continued to express many positive values about the equality of men and women, the motherhood of God and the

fatherhood of God, the importance of women in the Church, but many elements were ambiguous and not so acceptable to women's re-imagining of her divine destiny.

Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter to Women* of 1995, article 4 again gives special support to women: "And what shall we say of the obstacles which in so many parts of the world still keep women from being fully integrated into social, political, and economic life ? ... Certainly, much remains to be done to prevent discrimination against those who have chosen to be wives and mothers. As far as personal rights are concerned, there is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic State."

12 March 2000 was another important day for women when with Pope John Paul II making a Confession of sins against the dignity of women and unity of the human race, constituting a public apology by the Church on harm done to women. The 2004 Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the "Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World" once again affirms the equality of women and men. The document *Vita Consecrata* of the Synod of Bishops also recommends the appointment of women for responsibilities in the Church at all levels.

Some Milestones of Indian Women Theologising

Many conferences have shaped the first generation of Indian Catholic feminist theologizing. The Asian gatherings of Secular Institutes, the assemblies of the All India Council of Catholic Women, study camps of the All India Catholic University Federation, workshops organized ecumenically by the World Council of Churches, and several parish reflection-cum-study groups, plunged Indian Catholic women into the task of re-thinking their position and mission as women. Many of us have fond memories of the Bruxelles Colloquium organized by the conference of International Catholic Organizations, from June 9-14, 1987. It was a unique, unforgettable, multicultural event, pooling together the combined wisdom of women from various parts of the world, including several participants from India. It was a living

experience of community of the Church, in search of the justice and development a true community of men and women, in true solidarity, which Paul VI described as one “... of every human being and of the whole human being.” Conservatives and liberals fought openly for their positions. One recalls the tears of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza when the assembly decided not to detail issues of ordination at this stage of the journey. The Final Statement was put together burning the midnight oil, in the land of the midnight sun ! It is still relevant to the enterprise of Catholic feminist theology. Poignant in its inclusive span, and in its challenge of the traditional Christian stereotypes of what is typically male and female, is the section titled *Towards a Renewed Anthropology*, fine-tuned by the Dutch theologian Catherina Halkes, No. 51 and 52 of which states: “Another consequence of this woman-man equality is a broader understanding of our human response as created beings: the value of receptivity, once relegated to the feminine now becomes through the eyes of faith, a condition of both woman and man, and therefore specific to the response of a human being as human. This new receptivity opens a person to the spirit in such a way that he or she becomes dynamically creative and a full participant in God’s redeeming activity. Receptivity is no longer specially feminine, creativity is no longer specifically masculine, but both receptivity and creativity are dynamically connected in the human person’s response to God.”²

In 1982 WINA, Women’s Institute for New Awakening, was founded by Dr Jessie Tellis-Nayak and team, to promote women’s development. In 1984, with the support of Fr Engelbert Zeitler SVD, the three women of WINA, Stella Faria, Anna Vareed Alexander and Jessie Tellis-Nayak, published a book, *The Emerging Christian Woman – Church and Society Perspectives* to promote feminist theology and literature in India.³ In 1983 Jessie Tellis-Nayak edited another book titled, *Indian Womanhood Then and Now – Situation, Efforts,*

2 Statement, Women in the Church and in Society - The Document of the Brussels’ Colloquium, WINA, Bangalore: 1987.

3 Stella Faria, Anna Vareed Alexander and Jessie Tellis-Nayak. *The Emerging Christian Woman – Church and Society Perspectives*. Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra/Ishvani. Indore: 1984.

*Profiles*⁴ which gave the Indian Christian women a direction and purpose in the social, economic and political fields. Fr Zeitler encouraged Francis Yasis to begin Streevani as part of Ishvani Kendra, Pune, to promote women's theological education and praxis.

The Association of Theologically Trained Women of India grew out of these initiatives and was active from 1985-87. It continues to meet creatively to this day. Several Indian women attended the Pan-Asian Women's Consultation, organized by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, in Manila November 1985 and brought the fruits of these deliberations into Indian women's theologizing. Later, Udaya Kiran was founded in 1992, then *Satyashodak* in Bombay, *Vimochana* and Women's Voice in Bangalore. The Diocesan Councils of Catholic Women, the Council of Catholic Women of India (CCWI), helped the bonding among Christian women and women of other faiths. They have promoted the development and implementation of numerous recommendations for women's empowerment.

The CBCI Women's Desk came into existence in June 1992 and was set up by the efforts of the renowned Sr Cleopatra. She began its newsletter. *Magnificat* has spread the message of women's empowerment to the local parish level. Already in 1997 she had composed a directory of Indian organizations working on gender issues. *Magnificat* was continued by Virginia Saldhana and the Women's Desk is now run by Sr Lily Francis. Later, parallel women's desks were established in dioceses of India wherever possible. In May 1993 the National Consultation of Women Leaders was organized by Sr Cleopatra of CBCI Women's Desk and the All India Association for Christian Higher Education (AIACHE) in Kristu Jyoti College, Bangalore. This report is comprehensive and covers the various National Acts and laws concerning women, as well as all the issues and concerns concerning women in Church and society. Feminist theologizing in India has always been ecumenical and this consultation intensified the fellowship between women of the different Churches

4 Jessie Tellis-Nayak, *Indian Womanhood Then and Now – Situation, Efforts, Profiles*. Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, Indore: 1983.

in India.⁵ AIACHE has been behind the institution of Women's Cells in Christian colleges and held many workshops and conferences on Women's Studies.

In 1995 the Documents of the General Congregation 34 of the Society of Jesus made special reference to women and Jesuits in India took up the mandate in a serious way: "... we Jesuits first ask for the grace of conversion. We have been part of a civil and ecclesial tradition that has offended against women. And, like many men, we have a tendency to convince ourselves that there is no problem. However unwittingly, we have often been complicit in a form of clericalism which has reinforced male domination with an ostensibly divine sanction. By making this declaration we wish to react personally and collectively, and do what we can to change this regrettable situation" (GC 34, 3.4.9). Decree 3 continues, "... we invite all Jesuits, as individuals and through their institutions, to align themselves in solidarity with women" (GC 34, 3.4.13).⁶

The 27th annual meeting of the Indian Theological Association held from 25-29 April 2004, had as its theme, Concerns of Women: An Indian Theological Response. Number 22 of the Final statement reads, "To fulfil the vision of Jesus calls for a new way of being church: a discipleship of equals. The communion ecclesiology acknowledged in the Second Vatican Council, paves the way for an egalitarian and participatory model that recovers the traditions of women's discipleship and leadership ..."⁷

Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society, the Statement of CBCI in the 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, Jamshedpur, 13-20th February, 2008 was the culmination of intense discussions and reflections. The statement covers gender justice in

5 Cleopatra, *Report of the National Consultation of Christian Women Leaders*. CBCI Women's Desk and the All India Association for Christian Higher Education (AIACHE). Kristu Jyoti College, Bangalore: 1993.

6 The Interim Documents of the General Congregation 34 of the Society of Jesus. South Asian Assistancy, National Jesuit News: 1995.

7 Evelyn Monteiro & Kochurani Abraham. (eds.) *Concerns of Women: An Indian Theological Response*. Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore: 2005. p. 222.

Christian family education, equality of husband and wife, and removal of prejudice against the girl-child; the need to train women in theology and scripture and give them opportunities for leadership; the need to give priority to dalit, tribal and disadvantaged women, migrants and domestic workers, their education, employment, rights and redressals; the need to fight trafficking in women; the need to provide emotional and legal help in marriage cases; the need to support women in political leadership for Panchayat, Legislative Assembly and Parliament.⁸

More Christian women are publishing books on theology. For example, in 2004 Pauline Chakkalakal of the Daughters of St Paul Society published her doctoral thesis, *Discipleship A Space for Women's Leadership ? – A Feminist Theological Critique*, in which she combined sociology and hermeneutics to give a theological critique of leadership in the Catholic Church, describing feminist theology as liberation theology and presenting participatory models for a Church of the future which is more communion than hierarchy, more fellowship than structure.⁹ Several women from the Church of South India have written creatively about dalit women's theology. More recently, Christina Manohar, hailing from a family of theologians, gained her Ph D in Theology from the University of Gloucestershire, wrote *Spirit Christologies – An Indian Christian Perspective* in which she covers western Christological thinking and Indian Christology, traces the historical developments of the relationship between Pneumatology and Christology, describes Pre-Calcedonian and contemporary western Christologies against the backdrop of Indian Christian feminist perspectives.¹⁰

Asian Bishops Contributions to Feminist Theology

BILA is the Bishops Institute of Lay Apostolate (BILA) of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). BILA on Women I was held in 1995, BILA on Women II was held in 1998 and BILA on

8 Statement of CBCI in the 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI. "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society". *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 72/4, 2008, pp. 301-305.

9 Pauline Chakkalakal, *Discipleship A Space for Women's Leadership ? – A Feminist Theological Critique*. Pauline Publications, Mumbai: 2004.

10 Christina Mmanohar. *Spirit Christologies – An Indian Christian Perspective*. ISPCK, Delhi: 2009.

Women III was held in 2001.¹¹ Besides BILA, many consultations of the Church in Asia have focused on women. Among its many women-oriented recommendations, BILA 1 committed the bishops to “denounce cultural practices that violate the human dignity of women, such as female foeticide and infanticide, genital mutilation, child labour, dowry practice, prostitution, trafficking of women and children and sex tourism”, and to ensure “at least 30 percent participation of women in all Catholic organizations and councils”. BILA on Women II had a determination to implement a programme of justice “for all oppressed people”, encouraging “women to do theology from the perspective of their struggles and experiences of life” and promoting a Mariology that “presents an understanding of Mary and images that are inspiring and liberative for women”, calling for a review of Marian devotions “and to contextualize them”.

BILA III makes a further exploration into the depths of women’s lives as the bishops came face to face with “fisherwomen, hawkers, women working in bars, and mothers living in slums. We also encountered Buddhist nuns. We listened to all these women and heard the voice of our own faith. We identified God’s living presence in their struggles.” Later the document affirms, “Our spirituality was enriched by the wisdom of ordinary women whom we went out to meet. ... We learnt that in moment of crisis women are able to feel, identify and name the Ground of our Being ... We came to realize that by articulating our God-experience we can further enhance life and diminish death”. The bishops also woke up to the need to restructure theology courses, with scholarship, vacation and part-time courses to help women gain “professional theological competence.”

Some of the dreams of BILAs on Women were realized with the publication in 2005 of *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*¹² which gives the quintessence of fifty-five women theologians from seventeen Asian countries who deliberated at a colloquium held in Bangkok in November 2002 to promote a Forum for Catholic Women doing Theology in Asia.

11 Virginia Saldanha (ed.), *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life*. Clarentian Publications, Bangalore: 2007.

12 Evelyn Monteiro, & Antoinette Gutzler. (eds.), *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*. ISPCK, Delhi: 2005.

Some Ideas for a Practical Theology of Gender Justice

In order to create new relationships between women and men in Church and society, we need to be able to recognize the signs of patriarchal systems in our language, images, interactions, relationships and practices. There needs to be an attitude of critiquing with a truly Christian spiritual vision in such study, otherwise the effect will be to give women importance ostensibly but in fact continue the systems of patriarchy unconsciously. We need to:

1. To recognize and arrest those economic, legal and cultural processes which condemn women to live a sub-human existence

To name the kinds of physical and psychological violence done to women

To recognize the source of women's oppression in religious texts and beliefs

To recognize the signs of suppressed misogyny that masquerades as chivalry

To reinterpret the meaning of femininity and challenge sex stereotypes

To critique certain ideals of romantic love, marriage and motherhood

To enable women to have a new identity as persons and develop new models of partnership with women in the family, at work and in sacred spheres

2. To stop the processes by which women have been dispossessed and deprived

To stop the exploitation of women as givers and self-sacrificers

To challenge the commercialization of femininity

To open the way for women's potential to be released so that they make their rightful contribution to a new world order

To develop a new anthropology for the essence of gender, i.e., what is a woman person from biblical and tradition sources

To develop a feminist theology of marriage

To recognize women's spiritual leadership and task in the spiritual destiny of the universe

To encourage inclusive language in every sphere of life.

It is important for gender-based training to include, not only a critique of oppression but also to provide the ethos and strategies for creating an alternative society and alternative Church communities. Otherwise, gender training can leave people depressed and anxious about the current agonies of women. Men need to get a positive view of what the future will look like under gender freedom in Christ, and get a foretaste of the grace and joy they will receive when they give up the pseudo privileges of patriarchy.¹³

Gleanings on Woman and Church from other Countries

The documentation of the intensive and interactive process of the participatory research project launched from 1996 by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference in the book *Woman and Man – One in Christ Jesus*¹⁴ to encourage women's participation in the Church and break the "culture of silence" is worth studying in detail as it is relevant to many other countries and cultures. It critiques the mindset by which parishes are seen to belong to the parish priest rather than to the laity, the imposition of white culture on Aboriginal culture, domestic violence, racism, emphasises the needs of migrant communities, etc.

On 12 April 1988, the United States Catholic bishops issued a statement titled *Partners in Redemption*¹⁵ which states: "In direct conflict with the essential elements of our heritage, sexism breeds an oppressive mentality that divides and destroys. Such attitudes when found in the Church only serve to reinforce society's depersonalization of women. For example, some women reported that priest counselors told them to "offer up to God the abuse of their husbands." No. 40. On November 12, 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic bishops issued a statement and promoted a power-point presentation, "When I

13 Pearl Drego, *The Empowerment of Women in the Church and the Challenge of Patriarchy*. Resource Text. 19th National Conference of Council of Catholic Women. Delhi: 2002

14 Marie Macdonald et al, *Woman and Man – One in Christ Jesus*. Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia. HarperCollinsReligious, Sydney: 1999.

15 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Partners in Redemption*, accessed July 2009. <http://www.usccb.org/laity/help.shtml>

lives. We also need a *hermeneutic of possession*. Women have been dispossessed for too long, alienated from what belongs to them by right, with the pseudo-values of humility, poverty, passive surrender and condemnation of mammon. Women need to be empowered with the right to possess assets, to be financially independent and to be centers of prosperity which are at the service of the reign of God. There can be very little empowerment of women without the increase in women's ownership of resources, assets and finances. This is especially true of religious women. They have the right to access material and psycho-social resources from their congregations, their family, friends, students and local Church communities. We need to celebrate women's successes and allow their possession of success, retelling the great stories of women's lives and achievements as part of God's creative and redemptive work.

Once involved in the process of restoring women's rights and affirming her true spiritual destiny, the Church will find herself being renewed from within in another cataclysmic phase of evolution in which the true nature of "ecclesia" will be felt beyond the divisions of gender, race and class. The mystery of Jesus incarnate will then be freed from its male symbols and the sharing of ministry will be based on vocation and election that gives equal opportunities to women and men of all colours and groups. In this new "ecclesia" in which the theology of woman becomes fruitful for all, the community of the faithful will experience the divinely-ordained harmony between women and men, a harmony emerging from the redeeming act of a loving God who wills the salvation of each human being, making no distinction between person and person, between male or female, between one group of people and another.

TACET Academy

40 Tughlakabad Institutional Area

M. B. Road, New Delhi – 110062.

E-mail: pearldrego@gmail.com